



STRUGGLES OVER THE SEA: RESISTANCE AND BLUE JUSTICE IN TÜRKİYE

DENİZ ÜZERİNE MÜCADELELER: TÜRKİYE'DE DİRENİŞ VE MAVİ ADALET*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the emerging relevance of blue justice as an analytical lens for understanding socio-ecological conflicts in Türkiye's marine environments. Although the concept remains largely absent from the country's formal policy and academic debates, struggles across the Mediterranean, Aegean, Marmara, and Black Sea demonstrate how questions of distribution, recognition, and participation are embedded in everyday marine practices. Methodologically, the study combines qualitative documents analysis of policy and secondary sources with a region-based case study approach. The findings reveal that the contraction of small-scale fishing grounds, societal reactions to ecological collapse in the Marmara Sea, and contested energy projects in the Black Sea constitute distinct yet interconnected domains of marine injustice. The article highlights both the contradictions inherent in Türkiye's alignment with blue economy agendas and the potential for blue justice to emerge as a critical

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framework for advancing more equitable and sustainable marine governance.

Keywords: Blue Justice, Political Ecology, Marine Governance, Blue Economy, Marine Policy.

ÖZ

Bu makale, Türkiye'nin denizel çevrelerinde ortaya çıkan sosyo-ekolojik çatışmaları anlamada mavi adalet kavramının analitik bir mercek olarak taşıdığı önemi incelemektedir. Kavram, Türkiye'nin resmi politika ve akademik tartışmalarında büyük ölçüde yer almamakla birlikte; Akdeniz, Ege, Marmara ve Karadeniz'deki mücadeleler, dağıtım, tanınma ve katılım meselelerinin gündelik denizle ilgili pratiklerine nasıl içkin olduğunu göstermektedir. Çalışma, politika belgeleri ve ikincil kaynakların nitel doküman analizi ile bölge temelli bir vaka incelemesi yaklaşımını bir araya getirmektedir. Bulgular, küçük ölçekli balıkçılık alanlarının daralması, Marmara Denizi'ndeki ekolojik çöküşe yönelik toplumsal tepkiler ve Karadeniz'deki tartışmalı enerji projelerinin, deniz adaletsizliğinin birbirinden farklı fakat birbiriyle bağlantılı alanlarını oluşturduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Makale, Türkiye'nin mavi ekonomi gündemleriyle uyum sürecinde ortaya çıkan çelişkileri ve mavi adaletin daha adil ve sürdürülebilir bir deniz yönetişimi için eleştirel bir çerçeve olarak gelişme potansiyelini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mavi Adalet, Politik Ekoloji, Deniz Yönetişimi, Mavi Ekonomi, Deniz Politikası.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the notion of a blue economy has become an increasingly powerful narrative in global and regional policy debates. Promoted by international organizations, governments, and private actors alike, the blue economy is presented as a framework that combines ecological sustainability with economic growth by valorising marine and coastal spaces (Voyer et al., 2018: 595-596; Silver et al., 2015: 137-138). Closely linked to the discourse of blue growth, this paradigm has been embraced as a pathway to reconcile environmental

conservation with new investment opportunities in sectors such as energy, shipping, fisheries, tourism, and biotechnology. Yet a growing body of scholarship has highlighted the contradictions inherent in these claims: The very projects advanced under the blue economy banner often generate new socio-ecological exclusions, displace traditional livelihoods, and consolidate state or corporate control over marine resources (Barbesgaard, 2017: 130; Ertör and Hadjimichael, 2020: 2). In response, the concept of blue justice has emerged as a critical framework for interrogating these dynamics. Rather than accepting the blue economy as a neutral or universally beneficial project, blue justice foregrounds questions of equity, access, recognition, and participation in marine governance, and draws attention to whose rights and knowledges are prioritized or marginalized in the process (Schreiber et al., 2022: 2).

The relevance of blue justice becomes particularly clear when examining contexts where national strategies explicitly invoke maritime expansion or marine-based development. Türkiye represents such a case with its long coastlines on the Mediterranean, Aegean, Marmara, and Black Sea, the country has increasingly framed the seas as both strategic frontiers and engines of growth. This orientation has taken shape through two interrelated discourses. On the one hand, the government has adopted the language of the blue economy, emphasizing new opportunities in offshore energy, maritime transport, aquaculture, and tourism (Türkiye Yüzyılı, 2025; Karlı, 2024a: 245-246). Policy documents and sectoral strategies invoke sustainability while simultaneously promoting expanded use of marine resources, positioning Türkiye as an emerging actor in global blue economy agendas (Yavan and Kalelioğlu, 2022: 83-84; Karlı, 2024b: 755-756). On the other hand, the Blue Homeland doctrine has re-defined maritime space as a matter of sovereignty, security, and national identity. Developed within military and geopolitical circles and later embraced in broader public debates, this doctrine underscores control over exclusive economic zones, hydrocarbon exploration, and territorial disputes (Denizeau, 2021: 11). Together, these narratives reveal the multiple, and at times conflicting, ways in which the sea has become a central political and economic concern in contemporary Türkiye.

Against this background, examining Türkiye's seas through the lens of blue justice is both timely and necessary. While the state and private sector increasingly deploy blue economy rhetoric to legitimize large-scale projects, the lived realities of coastal communities, fishers, and local ecologies complicate the image of inclusive growth. In the Aegean and Mediterranean, disputes over fisheries management and conservation regimes raise questions about the recognition of small-scale fishers' (SSF) rights (Ünal and Ulman, 2020: 84). In the Marmara Sea, the 2021 mucilage crisis exposed structural governance failures and sparked societal debate on ecological limits (Karadurmuş and Sarı, 2022: 100). In the Black

Sea, hydrocarbon exploration and pipeline projects have provoked local resistance while simultaneously being framed by the state as national achievements (Yavan and Kalelioğlu, 2022: 88-89). Each of these cases demonstrates how struggles around access, recognition, and ecological stewardship intersect with broader narratives of national development and security. Taken together, they highlight both the diversity of blue justice concerns and the ways in which such concerns remain under-articulated in official discourse.

The aim of this article is therefore to situate Türkiye's current marine transformations within the emerging literature on blue justice, while also exploring how the country's specific geopolitical position, state structures, and policy narratives shape the possibilities and limitations of pursuing socially just marine futures. Rather than offering a comprehensive account of all marine policies, the study focuses on key developments in the four seas surrounding Türkiye, examining them as case studies through which to assess the salience of blue justice. In doing so, the article contributes to a growing comparative conversation on how blue justice can serve as both an analytic framework and a political horizon for rethinking marine governance in contexts marked by semi-peripheral positioning, contested sovereignty, and uneven socio-ecological dynamics.

The article proceeds in six main parts. The introduction sets out the scope and objectives of the study. The second section elaborates the theoretical framework, situating the concept of blue justice within critical debates on marine governance, equity, and sustainability. The third section explains the methodological approach. The fourth section presents examples from Türkiye, focusing on blue justice struggles across the Mediterranean, Aegean, Marmara, and Black Sea. The fifth section offers a comparative discussion, reflecting on the meaning of blue justice in Türkiye and its resonance within global debates on equitable and sustainable marine governance. Finally, the conclusion considers the broader implications of Türkiye's experience for advancing blue justice in semi-peripheral settings.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF BLUE JUSTICE

The concept of blue justice has gained traction as both an analytical and a normative subject in the realm of marine governance. This development coincides with a policy shift that perceives the sea as a potential growth frontier, while concurrently asserting sustainability as a key principle (Karlı, 2026: 2). The field of blue justice is not merely a simple adaptation of environmental justice principles to the marine context; rather, it is an argument that justice at sea is co-produced through the organisation of access, authority, and knowledge, particularly in regions where SSF, Indigenous peoples, and coastal communities live in close relationship with and depend on marine ecosystems (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee,

2022: 1274; Bennett et al., 2021: 2). In this sense, the concept of blue justice involves an examination of the ways in which marine development, conservation, energy, and logistics influence the conditions under which coastal communities are able to maintain their livelihoods, cultural practices, and political voice. It treats the questions of who benefits, who knows, and who decides as inseparable rather than as separate policy considerations (Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 188; Blythe et al., 2023: 3).

The starting point is the contradiction that has come to characterise blue economy agendas: The concept under discussion is an aspirational language of win-win-win growth, jobs, and protection, on the one hand, and recurrent patterns of enclosure, exclusion, and epistemic erasure, on the other (Bennett et al., 2021: 3). As demonstrated by political-economy analyses, projects marketed as modernisation or green transition frequently redistribute marine space and value towards capital-intensive sectors and distant investors. In addition, they diffuse ecological and social risks downward onto communities whose labour and knowledge remain essential yet undervalued (Bogadóttir, 2020: 108; Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 187). From this standpoint, the concept of blue justice does not signify a residual social impact problem; rather, it denotes a structural attribute of the manner in which the marine is rendered governable through investment logics, metrics and expert procedures that prioritise accumulation, thereby constricting the scope of legitimate claims (Blythe et al., 2023: 9; Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 185).

It is evident that distributive, procedural, and recognitional questions in oceanic contexts are inseparably linked, producing a continuous interplay across domains of justice. Research highlights ten recurring patterns within the blue economy (Bennett et al., 2021: 4). Among these are the exclusion of SSF, capture of benefits by elites, gendered marginalisation, weakened labour protections, and tokenistic participation. These are not isolated failures but structural outcomes of a growth-first paradigm. A companion working paper examines the mechanisms through which promises of inclusion are ultimately foreclosed. As Bennett et al. (2021: 2) argue, the privatisation of commons reclassifies customary practices as informal or even illegal under licensing regimes. Evidence rules reinforce this trend, authorising certain knowledges while discrediting others. When aquaculture initiatives or offshore infrastructure projects privilege standardised metrics over lived stewardship, or reduce participation to post-hoc consultation, the effects go beyond distributive inequality. They entail a redefinition of recognition, determining whose life projects with the sea are deemed intelligible to state authorities. Ultimately, these interlinked dynamics reveal how justice claims are continuously reshaped within the institutional architecture of the blue economy (Bogadóttir, 2020: 108; Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 186).

This is why blue justice scholarship places strong emphasis on the epistemic foundations of governance. Where epistemic justice is prioritised, the collaborative creation of hermeneutical resources becomes essential for equitable outcomes. Without participatory mapping, oral histories of currents and spawning, or community-maintained records of species' movements being rendered legible in planning arenas, the world of fishers is dismissed as anecdotal rather than evidentiary, enabling licensing decisions that rationalise displacement as optimisation (Schreiber et al., 2022: 5). The claim is not that scientific knowledge should be replaced by local knowledge, but that plural traditions must be represented with comparable authority in governance. Failure to do so produces a tilt favouring capitalised uses that present themselves as objective, scalable, and low risk (Schreiber et al., 2022: 5; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1256). As highlighted in recent scholarship, justice claims gain traction when communities mobilise their own data infrastructures-such as participatory GIS, community monitoring, and culturally grounded stewardship records-within regulatory processes otherwise dominated by developer-commissioned studies (Blythe et al., 2023: 8).

A secondary intellectual strand extends the scope of recognition beyond identity, engaging with the concept of capabilities. This perspective asks whether individuals hold the substantive freedoms required to shape their lives in accordance with values they consider essential. Within marine spatial planning and related governance frameworks, the absence of such capabilities often confines affected communities to symbolic roles, producing forms of participation lacking the power to influence outcomes or safeguard ways of life (Tafon et al., 2024: 2207). Literature in the field shows how misrecognition and misframing undermine key capacities-associational, epistemic, and economic-on which effective governance depends. The erosion of these capacities predetermines both procedures and distributions, narrowing opportunities for fair engagement (Tafon et al., 2024: 2208). This approach resonates with SSF-oriented governance, where tenure security, collective organisation, and parity of participation are conceived not as compensatory measures but as foundational conditions for equitable allocation. Rather than offering remedies after spatial, sectoral, or technological priorities have been fixed, these conditions frame equity as integral to governance design (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1261-1262; Bennett et al., 2021: 5-6).

The aforementioned concerns manifest most conspicuously in the confluence of marine spatial planning, conservation zoning, and offshore energy development with coastal livelihoods. Survey work specifically designed for marine contexts demonstrates that perceptions of fairness among fishers and planners are tied to how governance defines legitimate knowledge, structures voice and anticipates social impacts alongside ecological ones (Engen et al., 2021: 2). In the present studies, the application of governance principles is found to be

contingent upon their materialisation as design. In the context of agenda-setting, it is imperative to involve fishers as decision partners rather than late-stage consultees. Furthermore, social baselines should be specified and monitored in collaboration with communities. Additionally, criteria must be established to recognise cultural continuity, youth pathways into fisheries, and the reproduction of care work as justice-relevant outcomes, rather than as intangible externalities (Engen et al., 2021: 10). In the absence of such a design, marine spatial planning risks becoming a mere procedural shell, allocating marine space to the most capitalised users while equity bookings remain largely rhetorical (Tafon et al., 2024: 2207; Schreiber et al., 2022: 5).

The political ecology of blue justice illustrates how design questions are inseparably tied to strategies of accumulation. Examination of island and coastal settings shows that aquaculture expands, logistics corridors proliferate, and coastal megaprojects reconfigure social metabolism. As Bogadóttir (2020: 105) and Govender et al. (2025: 2-3) demonstrate, these transformations reshape wage relations, displacing ecological risks and undermining household dignity even when new incomes emerge. In Bangladesh, debates on coastal megaprojects reveal development as simultaneously hopeful and dispossessive, producing aspirations yet also generating loss, particularly when access is constrained and uncertainties concerning pollution, safety, and long-term claims remain opaque (Govender et al., 2025: 8-9). Such findings complicate narratives that present displaced SSF as transitional, showing instead how value extraction is achieved by reclassifying customary uses as obstacles and socially embedded stewardship as inefficiency (Bogadóttir, 2020: 104-105; Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 186). Literature further underscores that procedural remedies alone cannot resolve systemic dynamics of capture, since they neglect the institutionalised pathways through which benefits, risks, and voice are structured and distributed (Bennett et al., 2021: 4; Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 188).

The concept of blue justice as governance reform encompasses not only the recalibration of state procedures, but also the redistribution of epistemic and political authority. Interactive governance scholarship, with its distinction among first-order problem solving, second-order institution design, and meta-order values, clarifies why justice is so often designed out of marine policy: The scope for daily participation can be expanded without altering the second-order rules that privilege capitalized uses, or the meta-order imaginaries that equate efficiency with scale and growth (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1267). The following strategic recommendation is proposed: initiation of the process of change at a point at which it is possible to establish long-term commitments to the principles of parity of participation and capabilities as the objectives of policy. This would result in the rewriting of second-order rules (tenure, licensing, consultation, evidence standards) in accordance with this new framework, and the

transformation of first-order interactions into sites in which justice is exercised rather than managed (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1271-1272; Bennett et al., 2021: 7).

This reorientation resonates with scholarship on environmental justice and impact assessment, which stresses that distribution, recognition, and representation must be integrated as foundational dimensions of frameworks rather than appended as optional elements (Blue et al., 2021: 2). Within aquatic and coastal settings, it is essential to establish social and cultural baselines and to design monitoring and remediation mechanisms in tandem with ecological indicators. Representation must likewise be understood as institutional capacity enabling diverse groups to shape agendas and contest expertise, rather than simply offering testimony in hearings (Paloniemi et al., 2018: 367; Blue et al., 2021: 2). Parallel dynamics appear in urban and peri-urban green and blue spaces, where governance increasingly operates through networks of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). While NGOs may enhance access, they risk perpetuating tokenism unless coalitions are formed that prioritise recognitional and procedural parity over narrow service delivery (Rigolon and Gibson, 2021: 2). These insights are particularly salient for coastal parks, estuaries, and nearshore conservation areas, where community engagement has long been established, and where the boundary between protection and exclusion remains fragile.

The consolidated reviews delineate the intellectual landscape and demonstrate that justice-forward reforms are already practicable. Syntheses of blue justice scholarship and resistance movements catalogue legal, organisational, and knowledge practices that have enabled communities to avoid enclosures, to negotiate equitable access and compensation, and to embed customary tenure and stewardship into formal regimes (Blythe et al., 2023: 6). The assertion is not that local control is a guarantee of ecological or social virtue; rather, it is that parity of participation and capability expansion are empirically linked to governance arrangements that balance ecological resilience with social equity. This is because these arrangements alter the incentive structures and knowledge flows through which decisions are made (Blythe et al., 2023: 3; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1272).

Across these strands, a coherent theoretical position takes shape: justice in marine governance is fundamentally about institutional sequencing. Policy must begin with recognition and capabilities as its ends. Second-order rules should be redesigned to secure tenure, ensure parity of participation, and embed plural evidence standards. Only then should first-order allocation decisions be made within these constraints (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1266; Tafon et al., 2024: 2207). In practice, this requires safeguards for tenure and access in SSF; the co-design of social baselines and monitoring systems; the designation of

representative organisations with binding roles in agenda-setting and oversight; and the enforcement of epistemic rights obliging agencies to consider and respond to community-generated evidence (Bennett et al., 2021: 7; Schreiber et al., 2022: 2; Engen et al., 2021: 14). It also entails instruments that explicitly curb capture-anti-speculation leasing rules, labour standards preventing risk transfers to precarious workers, and remedies accessible without prohibitive costs (Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 190; Bennett et al., 2021: 4). Where NGOs act as intermediaries, their legitimacy rests less on service delivery than on strengthening capabilities and guaranteeing equitable participation of those whose livelihoods are directly at stake (Rigolon and Gibson, 2021: 7).

From this perspective, blue justice should not be regarded as a peripheral supplement to the blue economy but as a comprehensive theoretical framework for reorienting marine governance. It calls upon institutions to assign value to cultural continuity and community reproduction alongside ecological health and economic performance. It further requires that the knowledge, aspirations, and lived practices of fishers and coastal communities be treated as constitutive of the public interest, not as marginal contributions. Ultimately, success must be assessed in terms of the realised capabilities of those most deeply entangled with marine ecosystems rather than by sectoral outputs alone (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1271; Blythe et al., 2023: 5). Evidence across diverse contexts -from island aquaculture to Baltic marine spatial planning, from toxic sacrificial zones to urban blue-space governance- demonstrates persistent justice deficits. These appear where recognition remains partial, participation symbolic, and evidence monological. By contrast, deficits diminish in contexts where authority and epistemic legitimacy are redistributed to enable communities to shape the future of the sea as partners rather than subjects (Bogadóttir, 2020: 106; Tafon et al., 2024: 2222-2223). The works of Anbleyth-Evans et al. (2022: 1508-1509), Rigolon and Gibson (2021: 9), and Engen et al. (2021: 14) highlight the stakes: Justice is not a separate dimension balanced against sustainability and growth, but the very framework through which marine futures become possible for those already living them.

The philosophy of blue justice is grounded in a movement-oriented ethos that stresses practice and application. Foundational texts reject the distinction between neutral research and political engagement, framing methods, metrics, and institutional arrangements not as neutral technicalities but as mechanisms for redistribution (Blythe et al., 2023: 9; Pereira and Erwin, 2023: 1-2). This refusal constitutes a theoretical claim: Justice is not a property of systems observed externally but a relation forged through co-production, deliberation, and contestation. Within governance processes that prioritise SSF stewardship, recognise plural knowledge traditions, secure capabilities prior to allocating space, and tie participation to actual decision-making power, blue justice operates as a

functional theoretical framework guiding governance (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1258; Bennett et al., 2021: 2; Schreiber et al., 2022: 2). It is therefore not a slogan, but a practical model shaping how decisions in maritime contexts are framed and implemented.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative research design based on a comprehensive, document-driven inquiry into Türkiye's evolving marine governance. Rather than presenting a narrative review, the study systematically integrates multiple sources to develop an original analysis of how blue justice concerns manifest in different maritime domains. The backbone of the research consists of peer-reviewed academic literature on the blue economy, marine policy, and justice debates. To strengthen empirical grounding, the analysis incorporates official policy documents, national strategy papers, and assessments produced by international organizations. In addition, selected publications by Turkish civil society organizations offer complementary perspectives on distributional and procedural equity in fisheries, coastal management, and marine protection. By combining these different types of sources, the study constructs a multilayered picture of the discursive and institutional landscapes through which blue justice is articulated. This methodological choice allows the article to move beyond descriptive mapping toward a critical examination of the normative and political implications of Türkiye's blue economy trajectory.

The selection of case studies was guided by both analytical relevance and geographical representativeness. Türkiye's four seas -the Marmara, Aegean, Mediterranean, and Black Sea- were chosen as distinct arenas where justice questions take shape in different ways. Each case encapsulates a particular dimension of the tensions between ecological sustainability, economic development, and social fairness. The Marmara Sea illustrates how ecological collapse, symbolized by the mucilage crisis, brings issues of accountability and public recognition to the fore. The Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean highlight distributional and participatory conflicts within fisheries, as well as the geopolitical disputes that shape marine resource governance. Finally, the Black Sea emphasizes resource extraction and regional cooperation frameworks, revealing the challenges of balancing national sovereignty with transboundary responsibilities. By structuring the empirical inquiry around these four seas, the article situates Türkiye's marine policies within a comparative and spatially differentiated framework that underscores the heterogeneous ways in which blue justice is negotiated.

The analytical process followed a qualitative documentary analysis rather than formal interpretive content analysis. For each sea, relevant academic and

policy documents were identified through targeted keyword searches (e.g., fisher, energy, resistance) across scholarly databases, institutional repositories, and media sources. No coding software was employed. Instead, documents were read closely to identify themes related to access, participation, distribution, and recognition. Particular attention was given to key policy documents, such as the Marmara Sea Integrated Strategic Plan (2021-2024), alongside academic studies, NGO reports, and media articles (Republic of Türkiye 2021). Systematic triangulation was used to validate and enrich the analysis by cross-referencing thematic patterns across academic studies, policy documents, NGO reports, and media sources. This process made it possible to identify overlaps and discrepancies between different types of evidence, thereby enhancing both the credibility and depth of the findings. While the study did not involve fieldwork or primary interviews, this approach grounds the analysis in a wide evidentiary base and provides conceptual originality. The methodology thus positions the article as both an empirical and theoretical contribution to scholarship on blue justice, while revealing how justice discourses are mobilized, reconfigured, or silenced across Türkiye's marine domains.

3. EXAMPLES FROM TÜRKİYE: BLUE JUSTICE STRUGGLES

The debates on blue justice underscore that struggles over marine resources are deeply entangled with questions of access, distribution, and recognition within governance regimes that prioritize economic growth and blue economy expansion (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1258). As highlighted in recent scholarship, blue justice emerges precisely where market-driven logics displace long-standing socio-ecological relations, leaving SSF and coastal communities to contest exclusionary practices and demand recognition (Blythe et al., 2023: 2; Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 190). When situated in this global discussion, Türkiye's seas represent a critical site where competing visions of the marine materialize in conflicts over aquaculture, industrial fishing, tourism, and energy projects (Ertör-Akyazi and Ertör, 2022: 569-570).

Taken together, the cases discussed below from Türkiye exemplify the lived realities of blue justice struggles emphasized in the literature. They show that blue justice is not merely a normative ideal but a practical framework for interpreting concrete conflicts, from aquaculture-driven displacement in the Mediterranean and Aegean, to pollution-induced crises in the Marmara, to extractive pressures in the Black Sea. In each case, the issues of access, recognition, and governance highlighted by scholars of blue justice (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1259; Blythe et al., 2023: 2; Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 188; Ertör, 2023: 1171) are vividly present, demonstrating that Türkiye's seas are not peripheral but central to global debates on just and sustainable marine governance.

Mediterranean and Aegean Seas: Coastal Livelihoods and the Struggle for Blue Justice

In Türkiye's Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, the pursuit of fisheries justice illustrates the entanglement of ecological decline, institutional fragmentation, and the reorganization of coastal spaces for competing uses. SSF, which have historically sustained local communities and embodied cultural ties to the sea, are increasingly marginalized by the expansion of industrial fishing, aquaculture, and coastal tourism (Said et al., 2020: 1-2). These processes exemplify the ways in which access to marine resources and decision-making is structured by broader political-economic logics, often prioritizing efficiency, development, or growth over equity and community well-being. Within the conceptual lens of blue justice, these dynamics bring to the fore not only distributive inequities-loss of access to traditional fishing grounds-but also recognitional struggles, as fishers assert their role as custodians of coastal heritage and ecological stewardship (Ertör-Akyazi and Ertör, 2022: 573; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1275).

One central challenge arises from institutional fragmentation in Turkish marine governance. Multiple ministries and agencies share overlapping responsibilities for fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, and conservation, which hinders integrated decision-making and leaves fishers with limited channels for effective participation (Ünal and Ulman, 2020: 90). Such governance arrangements frequently exclude SSF from meaningful influence, thereby exemplifying what Chuenpagdee and Jentoft (2015: 17-18) describe as governance failures rooted in asymmetrical power relations. At the same time, regulatory frameworks often impose restrictions-such as gear bans or seasonal closures-without corresponding support for livelihoods, deepening perceptions of injustice.

Tourism adds a further layer of exclusion. The rapid development of mass tourism along Türkiye's Aegean and Mediterranean coasts has reconfigured harbours, beaches, and nearshore ecosystems for recreational and commercial purposes (Bramwell, 2004: 105; Uğuz et al., 2022: 304). These transformations not only displace fishing activity spatially, but also symbolically, as local fisheries identities are subordinated to commodified visions of the coast as a leisure landscape. In several regions, such as Muğla and Antalya, conflicts emerge between SSF and marina operators, highlighting how the allocation of space reflects competing notions of value: economic return from tourism versus cultural continuity and ecological responsibility of SSF (Sezerel and Karagöz, 2023: 17-18).

At the same time, there are notable examples of resistance and adaptive governance that embody principles of blue justice. In Gökova Bay, the

establishment of a co-managed marine protected area led by local fishing cooperatives, NGOs, and state actors stands as a pioneering model. By empowering local fishers to enforce no-fishing zones and monitor ecological conditions, the initiative not only contributed to stock recovery but also strengthened fishers' legitimacy in marine governance (Ünal and Kızılkaya, 2019: 523). Similar efforts in the Datça-Bozburun Special Environmental Protection Area highlight how collective action around ecological stewardship can align with justice claims by emphasizing both distributive rights (continued access to resources) and recognition of cultural identities tied to fishing (Sezerel and Karagöz, 2023: 17-18).

These struggles are not unique to Türkiye but resonate across the Mediterranean. SSF in Tunisia, Morocco, and Spain similarly mobilize against industrial encroachment and for recognition of their ecological knowledge in decision-making (Marchessaux et al., 2023: 2). Yet Türkiye's case demonstrates the compounded pressures of fragmented governance, rapid coastal development, and weak participatory institutions. Within this context, blue justice provides a framework to foreground the voices of SSF, not only in terms of equitable resource distribution but also in claiming cultural dignity, historical continuity, and the right to sustain alternative socio-ecological relations with the sea (Ertör, 2023: 1159).

In sum, Türkiye's Aegean and Mediterranean coasts exemplify the multifaceted struggles of SSF communities. They confront ecological degradation through overfishing and habitat loss, socio-economic displacement through tourism and aquaculture, and political marginalization through fragmented governance. Yet they also demonstrate resistance through cooperative initiatives and alliances that embody blue justice in practice. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for any equitable future of marine governance in Türkiye and the wider Mediterranean.

Marmara Sea Mucilage Crisis as a Case of Blue Injustice

The 2021 mucilage crisis in the Sea of Marmara represents a pivotal case for examining blue justice in Türkiye. While the phenomenon was initially framed by public authorities as an ecological anomaly triggered by climate change and excess nutrient loading, its broader implications reveal systemic injustices in the governance of marine resources. From a distributive perspective, the ecological burden of decades-long industrial discharges, unregulated urban growth, and insufficient wastewater treatment was disproportionately transferred onto SSF and coastal communities. These groups experienced immediate losses in income, marine biodiversity, and cultural ties to the sea, whereas the industrial and urban actors most responsible for the crisis were largely shielded from its socioeconomic

consequences (Yümün et al., 2023: 101; Karakulak et al., 2023: 210). This asymmetry reflects the unequal distribution of costs and benefits, a core dimension of blue justice.

The mucilage outbreak was not the product of a sudden ecological shock but rather the culmination of chronic governance failures. Research demonstrates that since the 1980s, the Sea of Marmara has been subjected to sustained nutrient inflows from industrial zones such as Istanbul, Kocaeli, and Bursa, surpassing its ecological carrying capacity (Demirel et al., 2023: 224; Keleş et al., 2020: 176-177). This ecological degradation was compounded by the fragmented structure of marine governance, characterized by overlapping ministerial mandates and weak regulatory enforcement (Sarı, 2022: 97-98). The crisis exposed the institutional inability to act preventively, leaving SSF particularly vulnerable. As noted in studies of fishery resources and mucilage episodes, the event triggered not only ecological collapse but also severe disruptions to fisheries, making the Marmara one of the most emblematic cases where marine governance deficiencies translated directly into social injustice (Demirel et al., 2023: 219)

Participation and recognition dimensions of blue justice are equally salient in this case. Although the mucilage disaster prompted the rapid adoption of the Marmara Sea Integrated Strategy Plan (Republic of Türkiye, 2021), the process was largely technocratic and top-down. Decision-making was concentrated within central government institutions and scientific expert groups, with minimal input from SSF, local cooperatives, or civil society organizations (Karakulak et al., 2023: 198). Fishing communities in places such as the Marmara Islands, Bandırma, and Erdek articulated their concerns through cooperatives and public statements, emphasizing livelihood losses and demanding inclusion in governance mechanisms (Demirel and Sezer, 2024: 367). Yet their voices were often marginalized or treated as secondary to expert-driven models. This exclusion highlights the lack of procedural fairness in marine governance and the neglect of experiential knowledge held by fishers, who are key stakeholders in sustaining marine ecosystems. Recognition justice was similarly limited, as local actors were rarely acknowledged as legitimate partners in shaping long-term solutions, despite their embedded knowledge and dependence on marine resources.

NGO mobilisations offered an alternative form of political agency. Campaigns launched by Greenpeace Turkey not only framed mucilage as an ecological crisis, but also as a social and political failure (Greenpeace, 2021). These mobilisations broadened the discourse, drawing attention to accountability, transparency and democratic participation in marine governance. However, marine-oriented justice claims remain relatively underdeveloped and fragmented compared to land-based environmental struggles in Türkiye (Ertör-Akyazı and Ertör, 2022: 570). Although the mucilage crisis raised public awareness and

sparked short-term mobilisation, sustaining such movements over time is challenging. This temporal fragility highlights the vulnerable position of blue justice claims in Türkiye, where the marine environment has often been peripheral to dominant environmental justice agendas.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Marmara Sea crisis is an example of how a blue justice lens can be used to link ecological limits to social inequality. In this case, distributive injustices are seen in the unequal distribution of costs, such as the long-term industrial and urban nutrient loads that are passed on to SSF and coastal residents, while those responsible for the pollution remain comparatively insulated (Yümün et al., 2023: 100; Demirel et al., 2023: 225-226). Procedural injustices are likewise visible in technocratic and centralized responses -most notably the Marmara Sea Integrated Strategy Plan- that offered limited avenues for meaningful participation by SSF organizations despite their direct exposure to risks and losses (Sarı, 2022: 92-93; Karakulak et al., 2023: 203). Recognition injustices emerge where local ecological knowledge, occupational identities, and mobilizations of SSF are marginalized or treated as secondary to expert-driven framings, even though such communities sustain everyday stewardship and bear crisis impacts first (Ertör-Akyazi, 2020: 57). Accordingly, the mucilage episode should be read not only as an environmental disturbance but as a justice challenge that requires re-sequencing governance-embedding parity of participation and capability-enhancing rules before allocation and enforcement-rather than relying on post hoc technical fixes (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1265). In practical terms, this implies co-designed institutions that pair credible ecological measures with enforceable participatory roles for fishers, building on demonstrably effective community-based arrangements already documented in Türkiye (Ünal and Kızılkaya, 2019: 517), because without such social redesign, technocratic strategies risk reproducing the very inequalities that enabled the crisis (Sarı, 2022: 94-95).

In this context, the Marmara Sea emerges as a paradigmatic example of how ecological collapse intersects with social injustice in Türkiye's marine governance. The mucilage crisis, while emblematic of ecological vulnerability, is equally a mirror of societal inequities embedded in the governance of marine resources. Blue justice offers a lens not only to diagnose these injustices but also to articulate pathways toward equitable and inclusive governance that recognizes ecological limits and social rights simultaneously.

Marine Energy, Resistance, and Blue Justice in the Black Sea

The Black Sea represents one of the most contested maritime geographies in Türkiye, where energy infrastructures, fisheries, nuclear projects, and civil society resistance converge. Blue justice provides a critical lens to interpret how

distributive, procedural, and recognitional inequalities unfold in this basin. Unlike narratives of untapped energy frontiers, the region has long been a site of conflict between state-driven development and local demands for ecological and social justice.

A central axis of contention is nuclear energy. Projects in Sinop and İğneada have been framed as strategic for reducing energy dependence and ensuring national security (Aydın, 2020: 2). Yet public health professionals and local communities have persistently raised concerns. Turkish Medical Association (2022) highlighted severe safety risks, ecological degradation, and inadequate emergency planning in its reports, reinforcing that nuclear expansion undermines the precautionary principle. Complementing this, Demircan (2022: 77-78) documents how anti-nuclear mobilization unfolded under authoritarian-neoliberal governance, where dissent was constrained yet persisted through networks. On the other hand, the platform called Karadeniz İsyandır (The Black Sea is in Revolt), active since the early 2010s, has coordinated demonstrations, petitions, and cultural events, articulating demands around ecological security, democratic participation, and intergenerational justice (Karadeniz İsyandır, 2017). Such mobilizations highlight that coastal populations do not merely resist development projects, but articulate alternative visions of energy governance rooted in recognition and solidarity.

The fisheries sector illustrates another dimension of blue justice struggles. Since the 1970s, industrialization of capture fisheries and state subsidies have eroded the viability of SSF, leading to what Knudsen (2009: 45) terms a spiral of growth that privileged industrial fleets over artisanal practices. In the Black Sea, declining fish stocks and regulatory asymmetries have compounded SSF marginalization, generating procedural injustice through exclusion from governance, and recognitional injustice by ignoring fishers' ecological knowledge. Although cooperatives attempted to defend local rights, their impact was constrained by policy frameworks privileging industrial actors. Here, blue justice helps illuminate how access to marine resources is shaped not only by ecological decline but by asymmetric governance that systematically excludes SSF voices.

Offshore energy further compounds these dynamics. Türkiye's discovery and exploitation of the Sakarya Gas Field have been celebrated as a geopolitical breakthrough (Hodges, 2021). However, local risks-from seismic surveys to habitat disruption-are externalized onto coastal communities. Similarly, renewable energy potential in the Black Sea, particularly offshore wind, is advanced as a decarbonization pathway (Akdağ and Yeroğlu, 2020: 8). Yet, without participatory mapping of fishing grounds and safeguards for SSF livelihoods, such green projects risk perpetuating extractivism under sustainable development narratives. Blue justice calls for procedural guarantees and

distributive mechanisms that ensure SSF are not further marginalized in the name of transition.

Civil society interventions remain a critical counterweight to these state-led agendas. Beyond Karadeniz İsyandır, professional associations, environmental NGOs, and fisher cooperatives have raised objections to seabed mining, marine pollution, and coastal industrialization, particularly in Sinop and along the Black Sea coast, where concerns have been voiced about the environmental impacts of energy and military projects and coastal development (Knudsen, 2019: 40; Batıda Gündem, 2025). The mobilization against the Sinop nuclear power plant, documented through both grassroots testimonies and institutional reports (Demircan, 2022: 82), underscores a persistent demand for procedural transparency, environmental health, and community agency. These contestations reveal that blue justice is not an abstract framework imposed by scholars but resonates with lived struggles articulated by coastal actors themselves.

Finally, regional strategies such as blue growth propose integrating fisheries, tourism, and energy under a sustainability banner (Salihoğlu and Yücel, 2025). While promising in theory, critics warn that such frameworks risk subordinating ecological and social justice to economic imperatives. A blue justice reading emphasizes that ecological restoration and sustainable development in the Black Sea must be grounded in recognition of SSF rights, enforceable participatory mechanisms, and the meaningful inclusion of health and environmental expertise, as articulated by TTB and local platforms.

In sum, the Black Sea case illustrates how energy geopolitics, industrial fisheries, and authoritarian governance converge to marginalize coastal populations. Yet it also demonstrates how civil society—from fisher cooperatives to medical associations and regional resistance platforms—articulate demands that align closely with blue justice principles of distribution, participation, and recognition. Recognizing these claims is indispensable for reimagining marine governance in Türkiye.

4. DISCUSSION: THE MEANING OF BLUE JUSTICE IN TÜRKİYE AND THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

This article has argued that blue justice offers a rigorous analytical lens for understanding how blue growth agendas reorganize access, authority, and recognition in marine spaces. Read from this lens, Türkiye's recent trajectories—Mediterranean/Aegean aquaculture and tourism expansion, the Marmara mucilage crisis, and Black Sea offshore energy and nuclear projects—demonstrate patterned distributive, procedural, and recognition injustices consistent with the emerging literature on blue justice and critical blue economy (Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 190; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1273). While the rhetoric of

sustainability, competitiveness, and security positions oceans as engines of development, cases show how costs are shifted onto SSF and coastal publics, and how decision-making narrows around centralized, technocratic, or security-oriented logics (Aydın, 2020: 2; Hodges, 2021).

In the Mediterranean and Aegean, justice claims arise where aquaculture concessions, mass-tourism infrastructures, and industrial fishing fleets crowd out customary fishing grounds and degrade near-shore habitats. Comparative fisheries governance research across Europe documents how access regimes, licensing, and quota systems have systematically disadvantaged SSF, even in policy frames that profess inclusivity (Pita et al., 2020: 581-582; Said et al., 2020: 8). Empirically, this takes the form of spatial exclusion (e.g., near-shore cages or marina redevelopment), ecological pressure from industrial fleets, and the symbolic devaluation of artisanal identities as backward relative to growth-oriented sectors (Bramwell, 2004: 106; Fiorentino and Vitale, 2021: 5). Türkiye-based initiatives demonstrate both the vulnerabilities and possibilities of justice-oriented reform: the Gökova Bay experience shows that co-designed monitoring and enforcement, anchored in fisher cooperatives, can yield ecological and social gains when fishers are recognized as governance partners rather than targets of regulation (Ünal and Kızılkaya, 2019: 514). These dynamics resonate with international syntheses that frame blue justice as requiring more than equitable allocation; it requires transformations in who defines problems and designs rules (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1259-1260).

The Marmara mucilage crisis further clarifies how distributive and procedural injustices interact. Decades of nutrient loading, industrial discharges, and weak wastewater treatment produced ecological conditions that culminated in the 2021 outbreak (Yümün et al., 2023: 101; Demirel et al., 2023: 219). The immediate burdens -income loss, gear damage, and reputational harm- fell first on SSF and coastal livelihoods, while the actors most implicated in chronic pollution remained comparatively insulated (Karakulak et al., 2023: 210). The state's response via the Marmara Sea Integrated Strategy Plan delivered a rapid technocratic roadmap but offered few binding avenues for bottom-up participation or community oversight-an instance of governing for communities rather than with them (Sarı, 2022: 98). This sequence aligns with comparative observations in blue justice: crises often trigger technical fixes that stabilize legitimacy without addressing structural asymmetries in voice, accountability, and benefit distribution (Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 186). As a counterpoint, Marmara case also surfaced civic mobilization-cooperatives, NGOs, and professional associations-which pressed for transparency and redistribution of regulatory attention toward chronic sources, echoing global claims for socially just marine governance (Ertör-Akyazı and Ertör, 2022: 576).

The Black Sea case sharpens the justice stakes in the context of energy transitions. Offshore hydrocarbon development around the Sakarya Gas Field and renewed nuclear plans in Sinop and İğneada have been advanced under energy-independence and macroeconomic-stability narratives (Hodges, 2021; Aydın, 2020: 2-3). Yet the distribution of risk and authority is highly uneven: exclusion zones, seismic survey impacts, and corridor infrastructures are borne locally, while revenue governance and strategic control remain centralized (Akdağ and Yeroğlu, 2020: 2). Anti-nuclear mobilizations analysed by Demircan (2022: 88) show how dissent is constrained within an authoritarian-neoliberal conjuncture, even as regional networks articulate procedural claims for participation, recognition of place-based attachments, and precaution. In blue justice terms, the Black Sea underscores a generalizable risk in green or blue transitions: without front-loaded social design-secure tenure for SSF, binding participation in siting, and compensation tied to observed catches-new infrastructures can reproduce extractivist patterns under progressive labels (Akdağ and Yeroğlu, 2020: 1-2).

Taken together, findings align with and extend the scientific literature in four ways. First, consistent with European evidence, SSF displacement in Türkiye arises not only from ecological decline but from governance architectures that privilege capital-intensive uses and formal expertise, even where policy frames are ostensibly inclusive (Pita et al., 2020: 590; Said et al., 2020: 6-7). Second, cases support arguments that socially just marine governance requires procedural parity and recognition-i.e., institutionalized roles for SSF in agenda-setting, rulemaking, and enforcement-rather than ex post consultations (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1261; Pascual-Fernández et al., 2020: 23-24). Third, they suggest that distributive fixes (e.g., quotas, spatial reallocations) are fragile without transformations in knowledge politics and institutional accountability, mirroring global critiques of the blue economy's justice blind spots (Germond-Duret et al., 2022: 185). Fourth, Türkiye's political-economic context-centralized decision-making, security framings, and economic nationalism in energy policy-shapes the texture of marine injustices and narrows reform pathways, as documented in energy-governance studies (Aydın, 2020: 7; Hodges, 2021) and movement research (Demircan, 2022: 77).

These comparative insights have practical implications. In the Mediterranean/Aegean, the analysis implies that aquaculture and tourism should be conditioned on demonstrable co-design with SSF and measurable distributive offsets, building on cooperative models that have proven enforceable and legitimate (Ünal and Kızılkaya, 2019: 518; Pita et al., 2020: 586). In Marmara, durable recovery requires moving beyond crisis-era technical plans to embed monitoring and enforcement within multi-stakeholder arrangements where SSF hold defined authority-particularly over controlling chronic nutrient sources that

undercut fisheries (Demirel et al., 2023: 219-220; Sarı, 2022: 97). In the Black Sea, energy planning must invert the sequence by securing procedural guarantees and spatial protections ahead of licensing and construction (Akdağ and Yeroğlu, 2020: 13; Hodges, 2021). Across cases, the policy yardstick consistent with blue justice is whether governance expands fishers' capabilities to sustain dignified livelihoods and steward marine ecosystems-not only whether aggregate outputs (tonnage, megawatts, or tourist arrivals) rise (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2022: 1262).

Finally, Türkiye-based cases contribute to a global conversation in which fisher movements and allied organizations articulate parallel demands - recognition, participation, and equitable access- from Latin America to Africa and Europe (Ertör and Ortega-Cerdà, 2015: 203; Pascual-Fernández et al., 2020: 2-3). While the organizational density and political opportunity structures differ, the patterned exclusions document, and the efficacy of co-governance when enabled, suggest that blue justice is not merely a critique but a practical design principle. Bridging diagnosis and design will require scholarship attentive to power, institutions, and place, and policymaking that hard-wires parity of participation into all stages of marine decision-making.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has examined how the framework of blue justice can illuminate the socio-ecological struggles unfolding across Türkiye's four seas. Rather than approaching marine environments merely as sites of governance reform or economic opportunity, the study has treated them as contested territories in which multiple actors negotiate access, rights, and ecological futures. By tracing conflicts in the Mediterranean, Aegean, Marmara, and Black Sea, it has shown that questions of livelihood, recognition, and participation are not abstract principles but concrete dimensions of everyday marine struggles.

The empirical analysis demonstrates that blue justice is not yet an established category in Türkiye's academic or policy arenas. Nevertheless, the observed conflicts reveal latent forms of resistance and justice claims. In the Mediterranean and Aegean, the contraction of artisanal fishing grounds exposes distributive injustices that undermine both livelihoods and intergenerational continuity. The Marmara Sea, marked by the ecological disaster of mucilage, illustrates how socio-ecological collapse catalyses demands for accountability, transparency, and recognition of local voices in decision-making. In the Black Sea, controversies surrounding offshore energy projects highlight tensions between national development strategies and community rights, revealing the contested politics of participation and consent. Across these cases, what emerges is not a coherent justice discourse but a dispersed set of practices, contestations, and solidarities that can be read the lens of blue justice.

In theoretical terms, the findings affirm that marine environments in semi-peripheral contexts such as Türkiye cannot be reduced to the managerial idioms of sustainability or blue growth. They are sites of historical dispossession, contemporary enclosures, and emergent resistances. The framework of political ecology is useful here: it highlights how ecological crises and policy reforms are embedded in broader relations of power, capital, and knowledge production. From this perspective, the struggles observed in Türkiye resonate with global patterns of shrinking marine commons, marginalisation of traditional users, and the rise of state-corporate alliances in marine governance. At the same time, they also demonstrate the enduring capacity of communities to mobilise local ecological knowledge, defend customary practices, and articulate alternative imaginaries of marine stewardship.

The absence of an explicit justice vocabulary in Türkiye's marine policies does not negate the relevance of blue justice; rather, it underscores the urgency of developing such a framework in this context. As marine policies increasingly align with international agendas that prioritise growth, innovation, and conservation, the justice dimensions of access, representation, and recognition risk being obscured. Yet the conflicts and resistances examined here demonstrate that these dimensions are central to how marine futures are being contested on the ground.

This study has therefore shown that the notion of blue justice provides both an analytic tool and a normative horizon for understanding Türkiye's marine conflicts. By foregrounding the socio-ecological dynamics of resistance, it becomes possible to recognise that the seas are not only ecological spaces but also arenas of justice struggles. The challenge ahead is to render these struggles more visible, to strengthen the knowledge systems and practices that sustain them, and to integrate their claims into more democratic and inclusive forms of marine governance. In this sense, Türkiye's cases exemplify both the contradictions of contemporary marine politics and the potential for blue justice to emerge as a critical framework for more equitable and sustainable marine futures.

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