## RED GOLD RUSH A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER TELESCA

EURO—VISION is an art-led enquiry that explores the extractivist gaze of European institutions and its policies. The relationship between international relations, trade, economic policy and military operations come into focus through the lens of Critical Raw Materials. In 2008, the European Commission adopted the Critical Raw Materials Initiative, which defined a strategy for accessing resources viewed as imperative to the EU's subsistence. The criticality of resources is measured according to supply risk and economic importance. Policies are drawn up to ensure the continued availability of materials deemed critical. Such policies have led to agreements guiding the biological and geological exhaustion of the Global South. The current list, revised in 2020, includes 30 materials, including Silica, Cobalt Natural Rubber, Phosphate rock, and the newly added Lithium and Titanium.

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND EXTRACTION BEYOND THE REMOVAL AND DISPLACEMENT OF MINERALS—TO ENCOMPASS POLICIES, INTERNATIONAL TREATIES AND REGULATIONS THAT IMPOSE CONTROVERSIAL FORMS OF STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES ON COMMUNITIES?

> EURO—VISION focuses on the inscriptive operations of initiatives such as the establishment of Free Trade Zones (FTZs), fisheries partnerships agreements (FPAs), and de-risking investment tools like public-private partnerships (PPPs). In doing so, FRAUD proposes to consider these agreements through the lens of Critical Raw Materials, as well as to incorporate a wider set of 'materials', such as labour and fish(eries). We argue that the latter are managed as resources to be extracted, and that understanding them as critical raw materials as defined by governmental bodies helps to understand how their plunder is mobilised and institutionalised. More importantly, this framework enables us to look beyond these practices to the possibility of thinking and doing otherwise.

The following text is based on a conversation with Jennifer Telesca in the EURO—VISION podcast series.

In the previous episode, we considered legacies of pelagic extraction from the perspective of artisanal fisherfolk, and discussed how to begin unthinking and unknowing these extractive ontologies. In the following, we focus on the role of conservation management in accelerating extinction in conversation with Dr Jennifer Telesca.

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FRAUD We will be talking with Dr Jennifer Telesca about how marine policymaking has contributed to the accelerating extraction of maritime life. In her recent article, 'Fishing for the Anthropocene: Time in Ocean Governance', she denounces the role of managerial capitalism, armed with bleak yet powerful persuasive tools such as visual charts, scientific models and statistical formulas, which together "plan, measure and quantify time as an exercise of power at sea".1 In this vein, our discussion will focus on the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), and how it has managed and administered extinction, which is the focus of her recent book, Red Gold.2 First, Dr Telesca will introduce the protagonist of the book, which is often rendered invisible by managerial processes.

DR TELESCA I am delighted to share with you that the bluefin are extraordinary beings, like all beings are, if we just took the time to get to know them. The bluefin is probably one of the most consequential sea creatures in the Mediterranean basin. Here we have a creature that was fundamental to the rise of empire since the time of the Phoenicians. And she's very familiar to most there, especially southern Europeans in present day Portugal, Spain, Italy, and on the Mediterranean coast of France. The bluefin is the largest of all tunas across the globe. The bluefin in the Atlantic is one of the fastest fish at sea: the only fish that's faster is a sailfish. They guite literally just dart, like a bolt of lightning, across the ocean. They've been tagged, and it shows that they can cross all the way from the Western Atlantic, near the US and Canadian maritimes, and travel all the way to the other side on the Eastern Atlantic to reach the

eight-mile stretch of the Strait of Gibraltar to enter the Mediterranean Sea. Some tagging results have shown that they can cross the Atlantic Ocean twice in a year, depending on their spawning habits and migratory patterns. This is a fish that is capable of growing to the size of a horse. The record weight is about 1500 pounds, which is well over 600 kilos. In addition to the bigeye tuna, the bluefin also has one of the largest hearts of all tunas. I mean, they're just extraordinary animals. They're able to not only travel long distances across the ocean, but they can also dive all the way down to where the ocean becomes black, icy cold, in order to be able to hunt, mate, play with mates, whatever the case may be. I think the point really is that these are, you know, basically like the cheetah of the sea.

And unfortunately, the vast majority of people are completely unaware of what remarkable creatures these are. In my experience, in the over ten years now that I've been working with this animal, when I mention my work the vast majority of people might know that there aren't too many left, and that the bluefin sells for a tremendous price at auction. This is the most expensive sushi money can buy! It's always deeply unsettling, yet revealing, how alienated people are from the everyday life world of sea creatures, including the bluefin.

To also add here, this is a creature that is not like a cold-blooded cod, yet not like a warmblooded dolphin or whale. This is a creature that is somewhere on the evolutionary continuum between these two creatures. What I try to do in the book is, at certain parts, just remind the reader what an extraordinary creature the bluefin is. And yet, show the lengths that the technocrats, the fishery scientists, even the marine advocates have to go in order to drown out her majesty in order to be able to carry on the work of trade.

**FRAUD [AUDREY]** Thank you for that introduction to our protagonist. I think this is a good bridge to think about precisely how that work of decontextualization, of erasure and of *demajestification*, if you will, is happening on the level of ICCAT, which is of course the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. Which is also dubbed... what is the other name for it?

**FRAUD [FRAN]** The International Conspiracy to Catch All Tunas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Telesca, "Fishing for the Anthropocene", p. 96.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Telesca, Red Gold.

**DR TELESCA** The International *Conspiracy* to Catch All Tunas, exactly.

**FRAUD [AUDREY]** And so perhaps by way of introduction to this institution that I think is less well-known, interestingly probably less well-known than the extinction of tuna, and yet so tremendously central to that extinction. Could you briefly introduce how ICCAT functions and how it was established?

DR TELESCA Sure, I think the really important part to note is that the discussions about the emergence of an institution like ICCAT began in the early 1960s, at a time when maritime nations were already well aware that we had an overfishing problem on our hands. ICCAT forms in earnest (formally with a treaty that enters into force) in 1969. It is important to understand that ICCAT was both born of—and presents itself as—the crisis of overfishing. I think it's also really important to note now that here, half a century later, the plight of these sea creatures has not at all improved.

The question then becomes for me, when I first started this project: why do we have an institution that in name performs itself as a conservation-minded body, yet in practice does not achieve these goals? Or doesn't, at least, if we understand conservation in a broad generalizable way. And so I spent three years in the field: going to ICCAT meetings, travelling through its networks, conducting follow-up interviews. And effectively what I learned was that the institution that is mandated to conserve creatures on the high seas is actually doing the job that has been asked of it, by international law, which is to say that ICCAT is entrusted to enlist member states, so that they might fish as hard as possible, in order to grow their national economies. As a result, what's conserved here are not creatures like the bluefin, but the export markets of the member states that sign up to this treaty.

I think this is important because it alerts us to the fact that it's not just that ICCAT member states have overseen the slaughter. It's not just that they've witnessed the slaughter. It's that their practices have provoked it. This is equally as important for people to understand: that it's quite easy in broader discourse to intuit that the capitalists emerging out of the oil and gas sector are contributing enormously to the climate crisis. But less well acknowledged, if acknowledged at all, is the fact that representatives of state, technocrats, fisheries scientists, marine advocates and diplomats

are quite literally at the driving wheel in provoking the slaughter. That's the general focus of the book.

Regarding the work that ICCAT does, actually the member states are quite busy, conducting multiple meetings throughout the year on all of these various creatures that ICCAT is entrusted to 'manage'. Yet the most important meeting every year happens in November, when nation states come together and effectively decide the rules of trade for the coming year. And the rules of trade that matter most are the quota (the total allowable catch) and how those quotas are allocated. I refer to this in the book, to think of it in more layman's terms: the pie is total allowable catch. So how big is the pie going to be, and who's going to get how big of a slice? This is the real core of the work that this institution does.

I think it's also important to recognise that ICCAT's secretariat is based in Madrid, Spain. We have a landlocked city with what some people regard as the second-largest fish market in the world, after Tsukiji. And it's really important to recognise that Francisco Franco, the former dictator, actively lobbied in order to ensure that ICCAT would be headquartered in Madrid. It's an effort, in many ways, as some other people have documented,<sup>3</sup> that precisely speaks to this nationalist bravado, of thinking of Spain as this great maritime nation, rich in stories of the Spanish armada. These ideas of empire are central to the very formation of this institution.

FRAUD [AUDREY] Certainly the imaginaries put forward by the dictatorship in their propaganda series were very much as you describe. It's of course not a coincidence that ICCAT is centred in Madrid, which used to be called the 'puerto pesquero',4 which is as you say very ironic, being a landlocked city. In your book you describe, as you just have alluded to now, how ICCAT has essentially managed extinction. And that the very species and other species that they were set to save, which we'll come back to later as a problematic concept in itself, is nearing extinction. They have saved the market abundance of the creature, or the market presence of the creature, but not its lively presence in the ocean. The locale of where and what has been saved has slightly shifted from the species to its market presence in this kind of grand abstraction that they perform yearly in very

4 NO-DO, "Madrid."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For example Suárez de Vivero, Juan Luís and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Mateos.

tedious, long-winded conferences. Perhaps you could explain a little bit more specifically how ICCAT has administered and managed this extinction through what you discuss as these regulatory regimes that have effectively accelerated extinction. I repeat that they have effectively accelerated extinction, because this is really quite important, it's much the opposite of what we would expect from a regulatory body. And you say that they have accelerated extinction through exterminatory regimes of value. Could you expand a little bit more on what this value regime is, how it's defined, and also what is occluded by these valuation systems?

DR TELESCA Sure. It's probably worth sharing too that some of the perspective that I bring is as someone who is trained in anthropology. When I was in the field, my first clue that this was in effect an international trade organisation above all else was paying attention to the very language that is used to describe these animals. First and foremost is this language of a fish "stock". I've written elsewhere where I trace the genealogy of this term as rooted in both: a biological asset, on the one hand, (the idea being a stock traded on Wall Street), and on the other, which is also critically important, what we might understand here as a racialised form of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> If we think of stock as population, for example, when someone uses the phrase 'Mary is of good stock', this signifies that she's of good lineage. You may notice the way in which this kind of language is used not just by policymakers and fishery scientists, but also by environmentalists. This is widespread, normalised, taken for granted, everywhere in the discourse on fisheries. That tells us something really important about the dominant mode in which people are relating to the animal: first and foremost as commodity.

In addition, the language then becomes a window within which we might better appreciate how people who are entrusted to care for these creatures are relating to the animal. And then part of what I started to realise throughout the course of the research was that some of the very core legal guiding principles, like the very grammar of fisheries management, relies on what people refer to as 'maximum sustainable yield' (MSY). What's critically important here is the recognition that MSY emerges in a meeting in Rome, organised by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the UN, where nation states got together and—

by a one vote margin—agreed to the principle of MSY. And that principle later became part of the international law of the sea, forming in 1958.

If I backtrack a little bit, equally as important is the recognition that MSY is effectively a juridical formula based in statistical science that was invented by US diplomats in order to ensure two players stayed in check. In the 1950s, when Europe was clearly reeling from the aftermath of World War II, a third of all global economic output came from the US. At this time, the US was flexing its muscle over the world stage at the start of what would become the Cold War. And MSY at the time was used as a mechanism to outmanoeuvre poor states who didn't have the statistical tradition or expertise to be able to put together recommendations based on these kinds of scientific formulae. And then MSY was also a means to isolate and hold in check the Japanese, who also didn't have those kinds of statistical traditions either. I think it's really important for people to understand the very mechanisms by which ICCAT member states and other institutions within the world of fisheries management have been able to create the conditions for extinction.

There is this moment that I talk about in the book where I was at a meeting of the US Advisory Committee, which meets inside the Beltway, in DC, twice a year, in order to offer recommendations to the US delegation. I was at one of these meetings, and it was the only time in my years of research that people in the audience actually appreciated what an extraordinary animal this is. During the meeting, one of the scientists got up and shared on his PowerPoint the tagging results of four bluefin that travelled from the Gulf of Mexico, down to Florida, past the Carolinas, into the Canadian maritimes, in 90 days. In 90 days! This is an extraordinary distance. Everyone sat there in awe of the tagging results. The fiddling on the cell phones stopped. No one got up to get one of their free Danishes or a cup of coffee to pass the time. And yet, very quickly, in an effort to follow the agenda and carry on the work of trade, the brilliance of the animal evaporated in a flash, in large part because, again, there is no space for it. You cannot regulate as commodity the world's most expensive tuna fish and acknowledge the majesty of this creature at the same time.

**FRAUD [AUDREY]** This is a perfect segue into the next question that we had in mind. Throughout the book you explain how something that is presented as an objective neutral tool, like maximum sustainable yield, is actually really a tool for political bargaining and trade. You also

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Telesca, "Accounting for Loss in Fish 'Stocks': A Word on Life as Biological Asset."

mention how a significant proportion of the quota distribution of ICCAT is given to the EU, and how quota distributions are also embroiled in political bargaining and trade. I like how you mention that "rights to fish were 'chips' that delegations played in the broader political 'game' of wrestling for control over borders and 'natural resource' markets". Could you expand a little bit about this notion, or how you actually witnessed this first-hand by being in many of these meetings, this notion of political bargaining and trade, and how that plays out in ICCAT?

DR TELESCA There's a lot I can say about this, having spent three years in this institution. The best way that I could describe it: when I came back from the field and people would say 'so what is it like at these meetings?' And I would say 'it's kind of like a WikiLeaks cable'. There's nothing really surprising in any of the WikiLeaks cables, but to actually put that material in writing, and see what's going on first-hand, is still shocking.

I can speak certainly to the role of the EU here, which is to say one of the very first things that I learned when I was in the field: I remember someone said to me, 'what the EU is to fisheries, the US is to oil and gas'. It shows that there is ICCAT as an institution, which is really just a collection of its member states, and then there is each of those member states coming to the table with its own particular national interest. It gets quite complicated obviously in the case of the European Union, because then you have twenty-eight national interests in addition to try to negotiate.<sup>7</sup>

It's really important to differentiate between each of the member states as well, and to acknowledge, as I speak about in the book, that delegates widely use this language of referring to ICCAT as a "game". This was not my language, this was theirs. I take this language very seriously because it reveals an awful lot about what is going on inside of these regimes. I take 'game' as important not because I subscribe to a reductionist kind of game theory analysis, but rather that it's really important to take the social economies unfolding in spaces of ocean governance very seriously. Part of what is also going on in these games is an assertion of the status, not only of individual players and of individual delegations, but also the status of ICCAT as a whole, as world player, or as a player on the world stage.

In reference to some of the chips that you mention, Audrey, I had a very high-ranking delegate say to me at one point that it wasn't just in this case the bluefin that's on the table of negotiation. He said to me 'the idea here is, you take our fish, we don't give you bananas or coffee'. For example, in the 2000s, there was a hold-up in deciding what the total quota allocation was going to be because there was some wrangling behind the scenes between the US delegation and Morocco, which actually had nothing to do with bluefin, but had to do with exports of US automobiles. There's this sense in which ICCAT is not just about commodities both wild and grown, but also ones manufactured. Zones like ICCAT become spaces for low-level state bureaucrats to do the work of intel that is required and that trickles up into other diplomatic realms.

ICCAT is not an isolated unit. It rather forms part of a larger constellation of institutions that are working toward figuring out how to manage global economies. And we all know that the global economy is not very equal, and there are certain players in the game that tend to win. In one of the chapters of the book, I tell the story of what I call the 'Libyan Caper'. What's really interesting I think here is that we have Libya at the time of Gaddafi, and the rumour was that Saif Gaddafi, Muammar Gaddafi's son, controlled the bluefin tuna trade there. Libya clearly had some bargaining power with substantial oil and gas in its back pocket, as a rogue petrostate not under the influence of any one nation state at the time. This chapter tells of the game in which you have winners and losers, norms, rules and strategic moves. People describe ICCAT as a judo match, or as a chess game. And I think it's all of that. However, if it was just all about the rich overpowering the poor all the time, we have to have an explanation of why would poor countries come at all? Or why would rich countries waste their time if the outcome is already decided before the end of the match? It's precisely in this liminal, ritual act of this game where the status of the bluefin and the status of each of the delegations, and quite literally the status of delegates themselves, some of whom wielded a tremendous amount of power inside the institution, were at stake. Thus, understanding the social life of the institution for me was really important to understand. Why do people go to these meetings at all if the outcome is already decided? Part of what was really interesting in this one commission meeting that I observed in 2010, in Paris. Libya, as this rogue petrostate, was able to play the game so deftly that it called for a complete moratorium on the catch of bluefin during this commission

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Telesca, Red Gold, p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> At the time of research there were twenty-eight members states, at the time of this publication there are twenty-seven.

meeting. Libya forcefully played its card, and emerged at the end of the match nearly doubling its quota. The quota was taken mostly from Algeria, which at the time had a very dicey relationship with France under Sarkozy. The geopolitics unfolding in these spaces was just really tremendous.

I should add too that part of what was fascinating to see unfold was the prior effort of Libya to effectively double its quota.8 Very early in a meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), Libya effectively torpedoed the measure to list the bluefin as an endangered species protected under CITES. In many ways, part of what happened then at that ICCAT meeting was that Libya was rewarded by powerful players for this with a nearly doubled quota.

**FRAUD [FRAN]** Perhaps as a closing to your very compelling and powerful contribution, could you expand upon the recommendations that you gesture towards in the book? Such as the rejection of the hegemonic regimes of value. Also, elaboration upon a notion of value that moves away from the 'saviour plot', towards multi-species respect.

DR TELESCA Sure. I realised that as much as I've been with this material, I think one of the guiding assumptions that I'm making emerges out of some socio-legal scholarship, which suggests that law and society are not separate, hermetically-sealed spheres. Law is not a blunt instrument. It doesn't descend from high, from the gods in heaven. It's not separate from society. But rather, law is like language. It's a window into understanding the value systems of a society. In many ways part of what I try to understand, and what I try to encourage people to understand, is that for us to figure out how to change that legal system we have to change the values. In other words, we have to reject the idea that there's a hierarchy of being. We have to reject the idea that there's a hierarchy of value. We have to reject the idea that there's some kind of presumption that the bluefin, like any other fish really, is just a passive animal awaiting human consumption.

Part of what is going on in ICCAT as well as in some of the more recent fieldwork I've done at the UN's headquarters here in New York, is the recognition of how human-centric and how speciesist this law is. To the point about language, if we're to backtrack to maximum sustainable

yield, quite literally, in 1958, the law of the sea (UNCLOS) declared explicitly that fish are products purposed for human consumption. The question becomes, how would we then go about rejecting this hierarchy of value? There's two ways to answer that, one of which I alluded to earlier, which is rejecting the idea that the bluefin is first and foremost a product divisible by units, and that we might instead re-engage and re-imagine and no longer detach ourselves from the majesty of these creatures. If we were to create a system that valued all beings, imagine what that might look like!

The second way to reject this hierarchy of value is multispecies respect. The most difficult chapter for me to wrap my head around was actually chapter 3, which is about the role of marine advocates. It looks at the environmentalists, looking at what the environmental journalists were doing, in order to raise public awareness about the plight of the bluefin. I realised while I was doing the research that there's a dominant narrative throughout, and this is true not just of the bluefin. You find it in 'Save the Whale', 'Save the California Spotted Owl', and 'Save the Rainforest'. This logic of what I refer to as the 'saviour plot' is very central to the conservation movements, not just in the maritime sector but elsewhere. The saviour plot itself relies on a colonialist white saviour, as if there is a hero out there to rescue a damsel in distress, or some other innocent victim. This is a narrative very common in Anglo-European traditions that we all very well know, and it's easily digestible for readers on the go.

In this chapter I document the ways in which the New York Times, as one of the most important news organisations in the US, if not the world, has adopted this narrative of the saviour plot. The New York Times has not covered ICCAT since 2012, when the quota was at one of its lowest for the bluefin in the Eastern Atlantic. This is despite the fact that the quota for the bluefin now, at least in 2020, and this will continue now into 2021, is at its all-time high. In less than ten years, ICCAT member states have tripled the quota for the bluefin in the East Atlantic, just as the environmental advocates took their foot off the gas and basically stopped covering this story. And once ICCAT was no longer in the public eye, you could see it was quite literally business as usual again.

I remember actually contacting a journalist from the *New York Times* recently, and their perspective was 'but the bluefin story, that's an old story'. This should deeply disturb us all in the sense that you can see that—in addition to all of the toxic politics and very fraught modes of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> This occurred nine months earlier, in March of 2010.

so-called 'management'—we have a public that is totally ill-informed about sea creatures. And people in the public sphere whose very job is to inform the public have also advanced, adopted, and taken wholesale this idea of the saviour plot, and in so doing contribute to the problem.

The space that I know, the world that I want to live in, is one in which I don't want the bluefin to just be saved. I want a world where the bluefin, like all beings, is deeply respected. That strikes me as a precondition to ever save the animal.

I should also say that ICCAT member states manage not only the bluefin. ICCAT manages a whole other host of creatures: swordfish, shark, various kinds of sea birds, turtles, etcetera. With this in mind, if you represent Ghana, for example, at an ICCAT meeting, a big chunk of your population is artisanal fishers.9 A substantial percentage of the population rely on fishing for subsistence, yet the preoccupation of ICCAT member states remains a creature that is meant for the consumption of global elites. As such, the whole institution itself is directed at ensuring that global elites can consume their fish, as if there's just this endless cornucopia, as if there's this endless abundance of marine life. There are also about a dozen small tunas (like mackerels, bonitos, dolphinfish) that many artisanal fishers, including ones in West Africa, regularly catch. As there are no statistical analyses (they don't count how many they catch), ICCAT does not oversee, does not manage, the catch of these creatures, even though, from the period 1980 to 2010, small tunas made up 28% of all the catch in the Atlantic basin. That's substantial. In many ways ICCAT is preoccupied with ensuring that lucrative export markets are conserved, so that consumers in rich countries don't realise there's a problem here.

FRAUD [FRAN] I think that thought is more pressing than ever. We were previously speaking with the director of the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements<sup>10</sup>, and she was stating something that we may suspect but had not officially heard: that with the economic crisis that Covid has engendered, the notion of "recovery" is gaining new grounds. What was being mobilised before under the banner of growth, is now being dubbed as recovery, necessary recovery that will validate certain deeply problematic practices in the sea.

The agenda of the blue economy, of the blue capital, blue growth, without the efforts of thinking otherwise, will be imposed without much thought.

**DR TELESCA** There is another dimension here too that is important to acknowledge, which is to say that the environmental justice movement, which tends to be quite localised, and yet the power of the environmental justice movement is that, when mobilised, it can be used as a critique of entrenched structures of power. Yet the marine advocates (groups such as Greenpeace, the Pew Environment Group, WWF, Oceana) have not yet fully taken on-board in a marine context the importance of environmental justice in order to be able to launch a serious critique of these institutions. They too are embroiled in their own system of patronage in order to be able to get funding and carry on. I think there's this sense that—if we might imagine a way to extend this idea of respect it's through the environmental justice movement. Because it's localised, the environmental justice movement recognizes that we must figure out ways to adequately care for our common home. It seems to me that care for our common home. from an environmental justice perspective, requires this kind of deep respect for the interdependency of life, for the sacredness of life, for the fact that global elites are not the great exceptional beings on the planet. And we need to really imagine what a world outside of that could look like.

**FRAUD** [AUDREY] It is indeed an urgent agenda. I think this is a good place to end. Certainly we were left with the thought that the way in which conservation is managed, and the very premise of value, is very problematic, as well as the entire premise of the institution that manages this socalled conservation, which is in itself flawed from its inception. Therefore, it is only through a multi-species respect that we could even begin to imagine that this kind of management could function, because otherwise of course if we're simply counting, one could always make more efficient or less efficient counting, or be liable to corruption, or other systems. It's only really with a different valuation system that's predicated on respect that one could imagine that this could begin to work.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> When I was in the field, some of the delegates from Ghana suggested that that figure was as high as 10%.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements: https://www.cffacape.org/

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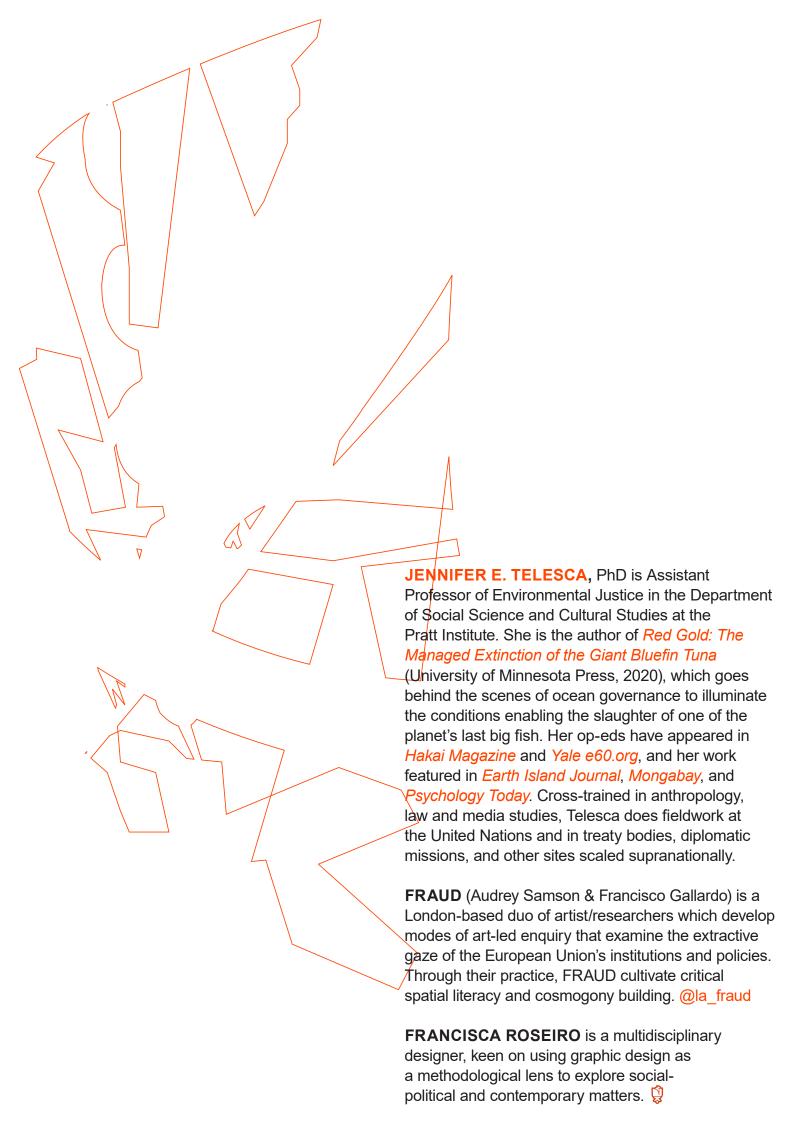
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