



Blue vs blue: Competing visions of offshore renewables and ocean futures

Larelle Bossi 

Research Fellow Institute for Ethics, Governance, and Law Griffith University, Australia

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of offshore renewable energy has exposed new fractures in environmental politics. While often cast as a Blue vs Green debate – global climate imperatives versus local marine conservation – this framing may not go far enough. A more accurate lens is Blue vs Blue: a contest between competing visions of the ocean's future. On one side lies the Green agenda, advancing offshore renewables for climate mitigation but rebranded as “blue.” On the other lie truly *blue* priorities: protecting biodiversity, respecting cultural sovereignty, and pursuing regenerative technologies. This paper situates the debate within the broader “Blue Economy” discourse, highlighting how ecological, cultural, and ethical attachments complicate the rollout of industrial-scale renewables. Ultimately, the question is whether oceans will be governed primarily as carbon sinks for global mitigation, or as relational spaces demanding protection, regeneration, and stewardship.

1. Introduction

The debate over renewable energy development and marine conservation has ignited some of the most unexpected alliances in environmental politics. Battle lines have been drawn over whales and wind farms, as erstwhile left-wing environmentalists grapple with the unintended consequences of industrial-scale renewable energy projects on marine ecosystems, and conservative actors sometimes adopt a surprising pro-conservation stance. Across the Pacific and globally, these conflicts are shaped by a broader tension: the pursuit of global climate objectives versus the protection of locally valued ocean spaces and empty horizons.

This paper interrogates the “Blue vs Green” debate, framing it as a conflict between global climate imperatives (Green) and local, relational ocean concerns (Blue). Whereas Green perspectives emphasize decarbonization and renewable energy expansion, Blue perspectives prioritize place-based ecological integrity, cultural connection, and the conservation of marine biodiversity. In Australia, offshore wind proposals – from the Hunter/Illawarra to Bunbury – have made these conflicts tangible, highlighting the complex interplay of ecological, cultural, and ethical considerations in ocean governance.

By situating this debate within the broader “Blue Economy” discourse, this paper argues that the divide is less a clash of ideology than a misalignment of scale, values, and relational understandings. I argue that when social license to operate and community engagement are more than a mere tick the box exercise for emerging renewable energy industries, there are dangers in trashing nature to the “fake news” waste basket. When we look beyond the scapegoat-sea-mammal which societies chose to save in the 1980s, we may uncover some of

what communities are trying to protect when they pin all their hopes on the great aquatic mammal. The symbolic whale, the emblem of ocean conservation, illustrates this divide: while renewable advocates champion global climate mitigation, local communities see the whale as a focal point for protecting deeply held connections to place, culture, and ecological integrity.

2. Historical context: from brown vs green to blue vs green

Historically, environmental debates have centred on the conflict between industrial development and conservation. The “Brown vs Green” conflict – fossil fuels versus environmental protection – was emblematic of the 20th century. Within this framework, energy policy and conservation were often seen as opposing forces: industrialization demanded resource extraction, while environmentalists sought to preserve natural landscapes and biodiversity.

Post-Paris Agreement (United Nations Framework, 2015), the narrative shifted. Decarbonisation emerged as the central imperative, with renewable energy development framed as the solution to climate change. Yet this shift also generated new tensions. As large-scale renewable projects expanded, they increasingly intersected with conservation concerns, giving rise to a *Green vs Green* debate. Here, the conflict is no longer between fossil fuels and environmental protection, but between competing environmental objectives: mitigating climate change versus protecting ecosystems.

An early optimism was voiced by Joseph Kiesecker, Jeffrey Evans and others proposing that renewable energy expansion through wind projects could be aligned with biodiversity protection through careful siting and planning – a potential *win-win* scenario (Kiesecker et al.,

E-mail address: l.bossi@griffith.edu.au.

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2011). However, by 2015 the picture had become more complicated. Andrea Santangeli and his team drew attention to the trade-offs inherent in rapid renewable deployment, showing how urgent efforts to mitigate climate change risked generating new conflicts with conservation goals, particularly in biodiversity-rich regions (Santangeli et al., 2015). Their work represented a turning point: moving beyond optimism, it called for integrated approaches to energy planning that explicitly accounted for ecological impacts. Post Paris, Jose Rehbein's team reinforced this shift with empirical evidence. Their global analysis revealed that renewable energy projects frequently overlap with areas of high biodiversity value, including formally protected regions (Rehbein et al., 2020). The findings underscored a paradox: if poorly planned, and guided by limited metrics, infrastructure designed to address the climate crisis can exacerbate the biodiversity crisis. In doing so, these scholars helped crystallise the *Green vs Green* debate as not merely theoretical, nor as emotive NIMBY outbursts, but grounded in measurable ecological risks.

These debates have more recently also laid the groundwork for critiques of *greenwashing*. The assumption that “green” energy is inherently benign for ecosystems is increasingly challenged, particularly when projects rely on extractive supply chains – seabed mining and critical mineral extraction – damage habitats or disrupt cultural landscapes, raising parallel concerns around ecological risk, social conflict, and governance legitimacy (Aska et al., 2025; Cavallo et al., 2023). Terms like *sustainable*, *regenerative*, or *nature-positive* have become part of a symbolic green lexicon, but without careful ontological grounding they risk obscuring trade-offs (Bossi, 2026). As Australian leading scholars across ecosystems, conservation and urban planning caution, “never before in human history have there been such high rates of species loss and ecosystem collapse” (Wintle et al., 2024) – a stark reminder that even climate-aligned energy development can contribute to ecological decline.

The Australian context illustrates these tensions vividly. The proposed Euston wind farm in southwest New South Wales would install 96 turbines near the Willandra Lakes World Heritage area, potentially affecting threatened bird species. In North Queensland, the Upper Burdekin wind project would clear 769 ha of endangered species habitat, impacting Sharman's wallabies, koalas, and northern greater gliders. On Robbins Island in Tasmania, turbines are projected to endanger one of the last habitats of the critically endangered, orange-bellied parrot. These projects highlight the uncomfortable reality identified by many population and conservation biologists, like Wintle (2024) Reid (2022), Woehler, and others: that renewable projects, while vital for climate mitigation, can still damage biodiversity and culturally significant sites if sited without ecological and social sensitivity (Reid and Woehler, 2022).

Importantly, many of these sites are located in remote or biodiversity-rich regions often perceived by policymakers as “empty” spaces, with limited human attachment or value. Yet this perception overlooks the ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance of such landscapes. Unlike urban green spaces, which invite everyday familiarity through gardens, parks, or tourist-friendly National Parks, biodiversity-rich sites often hold ancestral, custodial, or spiritual meaning, particularly for Indigenous communities. This distinction is magnified in the ocean space. Though largely uninhabited by humans, oceans elicit forms of relationality that are deeply cultural, spiritual, and political – attachments that challenge assumptions about what constitutes “occupied” or “valued” space (Bossi, 2026).

Australia is only beginning to grapple with what this means in practice. Whilst the ecological and cultural impacts of offshore renewables are not yet fully known, the conservation concerns already mirror the terrestrial *Green vs Green* conflicts. Recent work has further demonstrated that such conflicts are not confined to isolated cases but are emerging systematically across the renewable energy transition where supply chains dependent on mining, infrastructure, and energy development and increasingly associated with biodiversity loss and social conflict (Aska et al., 2025). Moving projects offshore does not

resolve the fundamental challenge of pursuing decarbonisation without sacrificing biodiversity or disregarding cultural and ecological values (Santangeli et al., 2015). Rather, this is the hinge where the emerging *Blue vs Green* debate takes shape, and where questions of ocean sovereignty, governance, and relational ethics become central to the energy transition.

3. Defining the debate: blue vs green, blue vs blue

The green vs green debate has already demonstrated that while renewable energy is essential for mitigating climate change, it can also generate significant ecological harm when developed without attention to biodiversity and place-based values (Rehbein et al., 2020; Santangeli et al., 2015; Wintle et al., 2024). Projections suggest that the number of renewable energy facilities overlapping with conservation areas may increase by 42% by 2028 (Rehbein et al., 2020). This spotlights an urgent need for governance frameworks that prevent carbon mitigation from eclipsing biodiversity and cultural protection.

This dynamic becomes even more complex when the focus shifts offshore. Unlike terrestrial developments – which occur within spaces more easily understood as bordered, inhabited, regulated, or domesticated – marine spaces bring different ecological and cultural relationships into play. Oceans are dynamic, borderless, and deeply storied. To situate offshore renewable development simply as “green” misses these nuances. Instead, a richer framework distinguishes between *blue vs green* and even *blue vs blue* conflicts, each addressing a different dimension of how energy transition collides with ocean governance, biodiversity, and cultural meaning.

3.1. Blue vs green

The Blue vs Green distinction emerges when global climate initiatives (Green) encounter oceanic and locally specific ecological and cultural concerns (Blue). This has certainly been heightened within the Blue Economy context which has increasingly been framed not simply as a domain of resource use, but as an integrated governance regime encompassing economic development, ecological sustainability, and social well-being. Contemporary blue governance frameworks emphasise cross-sector coordination – linking energy, fisheries, conservation, and transport – alongside participatory decision-making, co-management, and recognition of First Nations and local rights (Carter, 2010; Cavallo et al., 2023; Manathunga et al., 2020). However, as offshore renewable energy expands, tensions emerge between these governance ideals and the realities of implementation, particularly across international supply chains, and where large-scale infrastructure is pursued through top-down planning processes that risk marginalising local and relational values.

Green initiatives, such as offshore wind farms, are evaluated largely by their contribution to decarbonisation, often abstracted from the ecological and cultural contexts in which they operate. The metric is usually carbon: tonnes avoided, megawatts generated, or renewable percentages achieved. Conversely, Blue concerns extend beyond ecological protection of marine ecosystems to include the cultural, spiritual, and ethical relationships that coastal and First Nations and Indigenous communities maintain with the sea. First Nations conceptions of Sea Country centre on an integrated and relational governance in which rights, responsibilities, and ontology are inseparable (Marshall, 2023; Oliver et al., 2023; Strang, 2023). Sea Country refers to the seas and shorelines of coastal First Nations groups, understood not as discreet environments but as part of a unified cultural domain shaped by a broader logic of connectedness evident across Indigenous place-based kinship worldviews globally (Kearney et al., 2018).

Within these frameworks, worlds are structured through encompassing spiritual, social and rural principles (Langton et al., 2006), where human and non-human life is embedded within dynamic systems of relation rather than positioned above them. Kinship extends across

species and space, linking coastal communities to each other through marine life and their migration routes. This temporal and spatial depth is further evidence in First Nations accounts of sea level rise and coastal inundation, recorded across 21 locations in Australia, which correlate closely with palaeoclimatological data and postglacial change (Nunn and Reid, 2015).

Sea Country is thus understood as a land-sea continuum, where submerged landscapes remain integral to cultural identity, law, and governance. These submerged worlds persist through Dreaming narratives and are increasingly brought into dialogue with contemporary sea-floor mapping (Enyew et al., 2021; Kearney et al., 2022). In this sense, Blue perspectives are simultaneously ecological and fundamentally relational, foregrounding enduring connections between people, place, and more-than-human life. It asks not only: *does this reduce emissions?* but also: *what does this do to the seabirds, whales, benthic ecosystems, fisheries, and stories tied to these waters?* Sea Country offers not simply a cultural perspective, but a relational and integrated framework for ocean governance that challenges dominant extractive and carbon-centric models.

This relational framing is not only philosophical but increasingly recognised in Australian governance contexts. For example, the 2024 Kabi Kabi Native Title determination in southeast Queensland affirms non-exclusive rights over land and sea Country, including practices such as fishing, camping, and cultural stewardship (Government, 2024). While representing an important step, such determinations also expose the limits of existing legal frameworks, where competing ontologies continue to constrain the full expression of the relational Blue governance envisioned here.

Offshore renewables in Australia are a prime example of how such an integrated model is lacking from the outset. While projects in Gippsland, the Hunter, Bunbury, and Bass Strait are still in early phases, debates already echo the terrestrial *green vs green* conflicts. Migratory routes of whales, seabird flight paths and feeding grounds, community health and wellbeing, and cultural attachments to Sea Country stand alongside urgent climate imperatives. To reduce these questions merely to carbon equations is to risk translating life, kinship, and culture into abstractions (Alexander et al., 2020; Bossi, 2020, 2026; Voyer and van Leeuwen, 2019) – a process I argue amounts to erasure. *Blue vs Green* becomes but a contest not of whether to decarbonise, but of how to pursue climate mitigation without replicating extractive logics in a new colour palette.

3.2. Blue technologies vs green technologies

Ocean-based renewable energy systems may be assumed to be “blue” simply because they are located at sea. Yet this conflation obscures a crucial distinction. Offshore renewables – wind, tidal, or wave – are best understood as Green technologies, aligned with decarbonisation goals and climate mitigation objectives (Konyuhov et al., 2019; Sudhakar et al., 2025). They harness naturally replenishing energy but do not necessarily improve the ecological integrity of the marine environments they occupy.

By contrast, blue technologies are explicitly regenerative, restorative, relational, and in some cases, nature-positive. They do not simply minimise harm but actively contribute to ocean health. Examples include marine debris intervention systems, autonomous drones for ocean clean-up, water quality restoration devices, some multitrophic aquacultures, or biotechnologies that regenerate coral reefs (Ahmadi et al., 2024; Pace et al., 2023). These innovations are grounded in Blue Economy ethical principles (Bossi, 2026; Breakey, Marshallsay, et al., 2026) and extend them by prioritising ecological repair and strengthen relational narratives over economic growth.

The distinction matters. Conflating offshore wind with blue technologies risks diluting the meaning of “blue” and enabling new forms of greenwashing. A wind farm at sea is no more inherently “blue” than a solar farm in the desert is “brown.” Its orientation remains Green: addressing carbon reduction. To call it otherwise is to misrepresent its

impacts and potential. What a truly blue technology promises is synergy: climate mitigation coupled with marine protection and regeneration. It is not enough to just simply attach a kelp farm to the base of a wind turbine, without also addressing the impacts on migratory species, or culture. This aspirational alignment points toward a future where offshore infrastructure could be designed with dual ecological and energy benefits – but we are not there yet.

3.3. Ocean spaces vs terrestrial spaces

The ocean introduces unique challenges into this debate. Unlike our perceptions of land and our management of it, most of the ocean is uninhabited, borderless, and in a constant state of flux. Governance is blind to ecosystem boundaries and fragmented across jurisdictions, and vast areas of the high seas remain outside national control (Bossi, 2026). This creates legal and ecological uncertainties that complicate the siting of industrial infrastructure.

Terrestrial conservation debates often hinge on visibility and familiarity. National Parks, gardens, and reserves evoke everyday attachments; even remote deserts or mountains are navigable and, at times, habitable. By contrast, oceans resist permanent settlement. They are experienced less through occupation than through passage, livelihood, story, and memory.

For coastal communities and First Nations custodians, however, oceans are anything but empty. For local communities, coastlines and their activities by the coast define much of their identity. Sea Country, as articulated by many First Nations peoples in Australia, is kin, ancestor, and law. It carries obligations of stewardship that transcend utilitarian valuation. Similarly, sea-dwelling cultures such as the Bajau or Moken embody ways of intimately living *with* the ocean rather than *on* it. And for us all, there is something much more existential that is happening at the point at which the sea meets the sky.

The idea of “empty horizons” reflects a persistent spatial imaginary in ocean governance, in which distance, scale, and visibility produce an impression of absence. Yet this apparent emptiness is not an intrinsic property of offshore space, but an effect of how the horizon structures perception and knowledge. Martin Heidegger argues the horizon is not a neutral boundary but a site of simultaneous revealing and concealing, where the world comes into view only insofar as it also withdraws from full comprehension (Heidegger, 1993). What is taken to be empty space is therefore better understood as a limit condition of disclosure rather than a lack of presence or meaning.

Horizons do not signify voids awaiting occupation, but epistemic thresholds through which the ocean space becomes legible to particular governing logics. The “empty horizon” is thus less a description of offshore reality than a projection of visibility-based frameworks that privilege what can be seen, measured, and allocated. Horizons are never fixed boundaries but historically and interpretively shifting structures of understanding that shape what can appear as meaningful in the first place (Gadamer, 2004). The empty horizon provides a sense of situatedness within the world, holding experience in place while simultaneously exceeding full comprehension. In this sense, it can be understood as shaping not only spatial orientation but also affective states of stability, vulnerability, and overwhelm that structure how the world is lived and felt. At the edge of the shoreline, where ocean meets sky, human finitude is measured against the infinite. At the “empty horizon” human mortality is revealed alongside a deeper sense of belonging to something immeasurably larger than ourselves. The “empty horizon” is not empty at all, but a site where the limits of perception and the finitude of human existence are brought into relation with the vastness of the world it can never fully grasp – it marks the edge of what we can see, and the vastness that lays beyond us. Edge of a shoreline, where the “empty horizon” dissolves ocean into sky human finitude is measured against the infinite – we encounter both our mortality and our belonging. These dynamics expose a gap between how ocean space is experienced and how it is governed, with emerging scholarship on blue

governance similarly highlighting the challenges of integrating social, cultural, and relational values into offshore planning frameworks (Cavallo et al., 2023).

Relationality complicates industrialisation. An offshore wind farm may appear to planners, as a rational decarbonisation strategy in an “empty” space. Yet this framing depends on the abstraction of the horizon as void, rather than as a site of lived relation and meaning. For many communities, such developments may be experienced as an intrusion into a relational seascape, with implications that extend beyond ecological systems to questions of cultural continuity, identity, and sovereignty.

At the same time, offshore environments are not experienced uniformly as sites of loss or intrusion; for some individuals, they may also be encountered as spaces of refuge, openness, or affective release from the pressures of terrestrial life. Offshore development therefore generates conflicts between conservation and energy production, but also deeper tensions between relational ontologies of place and industrial logics of spatial abstraction. These tensions are not adequately captured by carbon metrics alone, and require governance frameworks capable of recognising the plural and affective ways in which ocean space is inhabited and understood.

3.4. Blue identities and values

The human relationship to oceans is distinct from that with land. Terrestrial spaces, however wild, can be cultivated, occupied, or owned. Oceans resist such domestication. They humble human presence, demanding respect and awe rather than possession (Bossi, 2026).

Research in neuroscience has been increasingly interested in the “blue mind” (Nichols, 2014) and “blue therapies” highlighting the psychological and emotional resonance of oceans: the wellbeing, clarity, release, peace and healing by our proximity to a lapping shoreline and empty horizon. For First Nations traditions, this goes deeper still. Sea Country is not resource but relative, demanding practices of care, reciprocity, and law. The ocean is a site of kinship and custodianship, not ownership (Bossi and Hamilton, 2026).

Even in Western imaginaries, the ocean has long been symbolised as a womb, frontier, or abyss – a space of transformation and mystery (Bossi, 2020; Marrin, 2005). It is approached not for settlement but for passage and reflection or rebirth. To industrialise this space through offshore renewables risks rupturing not only ecosystems but cultural and ethical attachments. These identities and values challenge dominant assumptions about what counts as “occupied” or “valued” space. They suggest that protecting marine environments is not simply an ecological imperative but a cultural and ethical one. As the ocean economy expands, recognising these values becomes central to equitable and sustainable governance.

3.5. Toward blue vs blue

Taken together, these insights suggest that framing offshore renewables as a *Blue vs Green* debate may not go far enough. The more accurate frame may be *blue vs Blue*: a contest between two competing visions of the ocean’s future. On one side lies the Green agenda, advancing offshore renewables for climate mitigation but rebranded as “blue.” On the other side lie truly Blue priorities: protecting biodiversity and ecosystem boundaries, respecting cultural sovereignty, and advancing regenerative technologies.

This blue vs Blue framing surfaces the real question: will oceans be governed primarily as sites of carbon mitigation, or as relational spaces ensuring protection, regeneration, and cultural stewardship? The answer will shape not only marine conservation and renewable energy futures, but also how we imagine justice and ethics in the Anthropocene.

4. Ethics, values, and place

Debates around offshore renewable energy are too often framed in terms of technological feasibility and economic efficiency, with ethical questions reduced to the arithmetic of carbon emissions saved. Yet, as environmental ethicists have long argued, such utilitarian framings neglect the plurality and often incommensurable values at stake in human-nature relations (Mathews, 2011). The expansion of offshore renewables requires more than technical assessment; in governments calling for social and cultural licenses to be obtained, they are implicitly requesting a careful ethical interrogation of how we define value, place, and responsibility in relation to the ocean.

At the core of this ethical tension is the question of instrumental versus intrinsic value. These tensions are also not confined to offshore energy but extend across the renewable transition, including the extractive supply chains – seabed mining and critical mineral extraction – that underpin green technologies, raising parallel concerns around ecological risk, social conflict, and governance legitimacy (Aska et al., 2025; Cavallo et al., 2023). Green discourses frequently treat oceans as instrumental to global climate goals: a vast, underutilized space for carbon-free energy generation. By contrast, Blue perspectives emphasize oceans as sites of intrinsic value – ecological, cultural, and spiritual. This distinction is further sharpened in First Nations frameworks of Sea Country, where the separation between instrumental and intrinsic value collapses entirely. Here, the ocean is not a resource to be valued but relations to which responsibilities are owed, embedding governance within systems of kinship, lore, and obligation. (Bossi and Hamilton, 2026; Enyew et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2015; Marshall, 2023; Oliver et al., 2023). The installation of turbines, cables, and industrial corridors across these spaces risks more than ecological harm; it risks epistemic and cultural violence, disregarding ontologies in which the ocean is a living relative rather than an energy frontier. This raises the problem of carbon reductionism. As Santangeli (2015) and Wintle (2024) caution, when climate mitigation is reduced to carbon equations, ecosystems and species are treated as variables in an optimisation problem, rather than as irreducible forms of life. This framing risks repeating the very logic of extractivism (Muir, 2022) that climate policy seeks to overcome, only now in a “green” guise. Offshore renewables may lower emissions, but if they do so by degrading habitats, disrupting migratory pathways, or eroding cultural attachments, then the ethical project of climate action is compromised.

These concerns are echoed in broader blue governance scholarship, which increasingly recognises that offshore renewable energy development raises not only technical and environmental challenges, but questions of equity participation and cultural legitimacy. In particular, there is growing emphasis on co-management, benefit-sharing, and the inclusion of First Nations and local knowledge systems as central to achieving socially just and ecologically sustainable ocean transitions (Bossi, 2024; Cavallo et al., 2023).

Relational values offer an alternative framework. These values – emphasised by First Nations custodians, ecofeminist philosophers, and the growing field of relational environmental ethics – highlight the ways people conceive of themselves as embedded within networks of reciprocity and responsibility (Rozzi et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2017). Oceans are 70% of our planet’s surface, it’s a temperature regulator, carbon sink and oxygen producer. It is central to the very climate change green technologies are so focussed on mitigating, yet its meaning to us, is more than these carbon sums and finance credits. Oceans are more still, than ecological backdrops but living systems whose seasonal changes, migratory patterns, and depth dynamics mirror human experiences of change, responsibility, and uncertainty. Even for those who do not dwell by the sea, the ocean figures as a source of awe, healing, and belonging (Nichols, 2014). Such values resist commodification and cannot be captured in the same terms as megawatts produced or emissions avoided.

Another ethical dimension is justice. Climate justice has often been

articulated in terms of intergenerational responsibility or global equity captured in the Paris Agreement (2016), but ocean ethics demands attention to place-based justice. Communities most directly affected by offshore renewable projects – First Nations peoples, coastal fishers, local businesses, industries, custodians and communities – are frequently those whose voices are least centred (beyond engagement compliance) in planning processes (Breakey et al., 2025; Rehbein et al., 2020). Blue governance values – interconnection, dynamism, transparency, diversity, and vulnerability – offer criteria against which offshore renewable projects ought to be judged (Bossi, 2026). Procedural justice demands meaningful inclusion of affected communities not as stakeholders to be consulted but as rights-holders and co-governors. Substantive justice, meanwhile, asks whether decarbonisation pathways are being pursued in ways that perpetuate ecological injustice – sacrificing one ecosystem or community for the “greater good.”

A further dimension concerns the frameworks we use to assess and justify action. Utilitarian and deontological approaches emphasise maximizing aggregate benefits or adhering to rules, which dominate current decision-making, often through cost–benefit analysis and regulatory compliance. Machiavellian reasoning privileges political expediency and institutional self-interest, entrenching power structures that resist change. Utopian framings can be equally problematic, invoking technocratic visions of progress while glossing over lived realities of impacted communities. By contrast, biocultural, kinship, and feminist ethics centre care, reciprocity, and relationality, offering ways of thinking that resonate with the personal values of identity, honesty, empathy, and the building of meaningful connections.

Across these divides, place emerges as a central unifying principle. Coastal communities, regardless of worldview, share lived experiences that shape how they value marine spaces. Place here is not a GPS coordinate, but an embodied experience of language (Malpas, 2018), feeling, memory, and interconnection. Place is a lived and relational field through which meaning is made (Mathews, 2011), identities are formed, and responsibilities are felt.

Symbolic meanings, such as those attached to whales, mediate responses to renewable energy developments, showing that opposition is often rooted in relational and cultural considerations rather than reductive framings of local opposition as NIMBYism, (Devine-Wright, 2013; Hazboun and Boudet, 2020; McLachlan, 2009) which overlook the role of place attachment, identity, and relational values in shaping community responses (Breakey, Bossi, et al., 2026). These experiences underline the importance of situating ethical debates in specific geographies and local narratives rather than abstract global agendas. What may appear as “empty” or available space within policy frameworks is, for communities, already full of meaning, relation, and obligation.

Finally, there is the matter of responsibility beyond the human. Ethical traditions such as First Nations ontologies, deep ecology (Naes, 1973) and post-humanist thought (Neimanis, 2017) call for expanding our moral community to include nonhuman species and ecosystems as entities living (existing and flourishing) in their own right. Offshore renewables ought to be evaluated not only for their human benefits but for their impacts on marine mammals, seabirds, coral systems, and benthic communities – lives and systems that also demand moral consideration.

If offshore renewables are to avoid replicating the ethical failings of extractive industries, then it may be a good idea to adopt frameworks that foreground blue values, relational ethics, and justice (Bossi, 2026; Bossi, 2024). Doing so does not mean rejecting the urgent imperative of decarbonisation but ensuring that in pursuing it we do not undermine the very ecological and cultural foundations that give climate action its moral force. By holding together personal, oceanic, and governance dimensions, this debate reminds us that ethical reflection is not an obstacle to renewable transition but a necessary guide.

5. Politicization and public perception

The politicisation of the Blue vs Green debate exposes the vulnerability of coastal communities. Too often, their lived attachments to place – emotional, cultural, and symbolic – are reduced to competing metrics or dismissed as irrational resistance. This framing overlooks the ambiguity local communities find themselves in; caught between global climate imperatives and localised disruptions; they are left to navigate uncertainty, disempowerment, and mistrust of institutions. Outcries of misinformation from industry and government are common, yet political narratives often wage wars on the science we do know, exploiting gaps in what we don't. We have explored only 5–10% of our oceans, and research on marine renewable energy impacts remains incomplete, leaving knowledge gaps that are vulnerable to a polarised debate and are easily manipulated (Copping et al., 2020; Langhamer and Molander, 2018). Communities are aware that renewable developments pose risks from habitat loss and bird collisions to underwater noise and sonar noise, electromagnetic fields and seafloor disturbances. It is unsurprising that the whale has become symbolic of these concerns. The whale is not invoked here as a biological case study, but as a socio-political symbol through which ocean values have become publicly legible. Historically central to industrialisation – it was the whale that supported human hygiene in soap, lit the houses and streets of our cities with their blubber, supported women's figures with their bones, and in some parts of the world were a staple on dinner plates – no part of the animal went to waste.

The whale has since been reconstituted as an icon of protection and conservation. This transformation reflects not simply a shift in scientific understanding, but a profound reorientation of public values.

While organisations like Greenpeace helped catalyse the global “Save the Whales” movement from the 1970s, the decisive shift was not driven by scientific modelling or expert knowledge who were tasked only to model a sustainable quota. Rather, it was the public – communities who had long been entangled in the material and cultural life of the whale (even when they had never actually seen one) – who redefined its value. Within a decade of the moratorium on commercial whaling, this groundswell of sentiment contributed to the loss of social licence for the industry. Once hunted to fuel our economies, the great whale was now protected by the very communities it once sustained. The whale marks a transition from extractive to relational modes of valuing marine life.

Today, this symbolic legacy persists. The presence of whales in proposed offshore wind zones transforms technical debates into emotive struggles over heritage, kinship, and belonging. As such, opposition is often rooted not in parochial resistance, but in deeply held relational and cultural commitments that resist easy translation into policy frameworks (Hazboun and Boudet, 2020; McLachlan, 2009). What was once a shared environmental cause has become fractured: typically aligned actors – local and global environmentalists – now find themselves positioned against each other within the blue vs Blue debate.

Political actors exploit these tensions. Industry groups mobilize the language of “jobs and growth” to legitimize large-scale marine developments, while environmental NGOs sometimes frame opposition as purely conservationist, overlooking the social, economic, and relational values at stake. In this discursive battle, coastal communities can become sites of extraction not only of energy but of political capital – arenas where governments perform climate leadership or opposition parties mount critiques, often sidelining the lived realities of those most affected.

6. Bridging the divide: toward blue-conscious policy

One key insight of the Blue vs Green and blue vs Blue debates is that political and economic identities may be more surface-level than place-based identity. While arguments are often framed around compensation models, ecological protection, or industry feasibility, the underlying

experiential reality of the rhythms of tides, the availability of fish, the erosion of shorelines, or the soundscape of migrating whales, remains constant. This suggests that pathways toward dialogue may be found when engagement is grounded in place-based identity rather than political positioning.

The concept of *a community of Being* highlights this dynamic. Place grounds people in a shared experiential reality, where belonging arises not through ownership but through participation in its rhythms. Coastal communities do not “own” their seas; they belong to them. This belonging transcends ideology, pointing toward stewardship as the deepest form of responsibility. People protect what they feel a part of. When offshore renewable projects disrupt ecosystems or the symbolic and cultural meanings of marine places, responses are triggered by relational attachment, not merely political opposition (McLachlan, 2009; Hazboun and Boudet, 2020).

From this perspective, ocean governance and renewable energy transitions might become more productive when approached through the lens of lived experience. Rather than beginning with political frameworks, conversations could start with the rhythms and meanings that coastal communities already hold. In this way, more inclusive and enduring forms of agreement may emerge. Policy tools can provide possible entry points into such dialogue. Ocean zoning, for instance, offers a means of balancing renewable energy development, conservation, and fisheries (Yates et al., 2015). Participatory forms of stakeholder engagement, particularly those attentive to cultural and First Nations perspectives, may broaden trust in governance processes (Bossi, 2024). Likewise, emerging “blue technologies” oriented toward regeneration could align energy transition with ecosystem health.

These possibilities suggest that bridging divides may not require choosing between climate and ocean imperatives, but rather architecturally cultivating spaces where ecological, cultural, and technological considerations intersect. By acknowledging the relational and symbolic dimensions of place alongside scientific and economic ones, it becomes possible to imagine ocean policies and renewable transitions that resonate more deeply with the communities they affect.

7. Conclusion

The Blue vs Green debate is fundamentally about scale and relationality: global climate priorities often clash with local ecological and cultural imperatives. Recognizing the unique qualities of oceans – spatial, ecological, and cultural – reveals that offshore renewable projects intersect with more than carbon targets; they engage with the lived experiences of communities and the ethical stewardship of marine spaces. The blue vs Blue framework reframes the debate from one of opposition to one of integration. By emphasizing shared values, place-based ethics, and regenerative technologies, policymakers and communities can reconcile renewable energy development with marine conservation, fostering cooperation across political, ideological, and ethical divides. Ultimately, oceans are not merely spaces of industrial opportunity – they are places of meaning, culture, and life, demanding careful stewardship even as we transition toward a low-carbon future.

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Larelle Bossi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used *Scite.ai* in order to *efficiently scope the literature on green v green, and blue v blue as they appear in published journals over the past 20 years*. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published

article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author, Larelle Bossi, declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The author has previously contributed to research and policy dialogue on ocean ethics and offshore renewable energy through the Blue Economy Cooperative Research Centre (Australia); however, this paper was conceived and written independently and reflects the author’s own views.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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