

Striving together: The struggle of artisanal raft fishing in Peru for recognition



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Fishing from wooden rafts made of lightweight balsa woods is an ancient practice that secures the livelihoods of many artisanal fisherfolk in southern Ecuador and northern Peru (Figueroa 2022). A prime example is the small Peruvian town of La Tortuga in the province of Paita, where fishing is the main source of income for an estimated 90% of the population (Mendoza Bruno 2022). Fishing tasks are divided according to gender and age (Espinosa Anaya 2015): older fishers mainly engage in raft fishing, while the majority of younger fishers target pelagic fisheries resources in open water and only join the raft fishery in the peak season of the Peruvian weakfish. Women handle washing, cutting and selling the catch, either locally or at nearby markets.

The continued existence of this system and the associated social dynamics and mutual safeguards are at risk. During interviews in September 2023, raft fishers confirmed observed trends (Espinosa Anaya 2015; Figueroa 2022) that some species had disappeared from their fishing grounds and that individuals of their main target species had become smaller or no longer occurred in large numbers. People in La Tortuga have limited job opportunities beyond fishing due to the arid environment of the coastal landscape and a lack of other industries. Using a common adaptation strategies in the Peruvian fishing landscape (Kluger et al. 2020), younger fishers are becoming increasingly mobile and turning to other fisheries, such as the squid fishery in Paita.

Photo: Drawings of balsilleros. Picture taken in Sechura, Peru on May 13, 2014 by Lotta C. Kluger

Location:

La Tortuga, Piura Region, Peru

Ecosystem type:

Marine

Main gear:

Cast net, gillnet, hook and line

Target species:

Common Peruvian weakfish (span. cachema, *Cynoscion analis*), Coco croaker (span. suco, *Paralonchurus peruanus*), Flathead mullet (span. lisa, *Mugil cephalus*)

Vessel type:

Wooden raft

No. of small-scale fishers:

Approx. 1,200 - 2,000



...Artisanal and small-scale fishers shoulder blame from both industrial fishers and the public for the dire state of resources. However, they argue in return that industrial fisheries operate less selective and extract large portions of fish stocks. In La Tortuga, raft fishers attribute the decline in local resources to industrial fishing activities, an excessive number of boats, sea lions, and inadequate control measures...



Justice in context

Types of justice:

- **Distributive**
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- **Market**
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- Environmental
- COVID-19 related

La Tortuga is positioned on the border of the provinces of Paita and Sechura, which has resulted in years of territorial dispute and a feeling of abandonment (“no-man’s land”). During floods caused by the dynamics of the El Niño Southern Oscillation, the town is temporarily cut off from the outside world. Over the years, insufficient infrastructure, economic obstacles, and a perceivable wealth disparity among families who could benefit from more lucrative larger-scale fishing activities contributed to a widespread sense of dissatisfaction, adversely affecting both physical and mental well-being (Mendoza Bruno 2022).

Artisanal fisheries in Peru operate with little formalization and are typically overlooked in national surveys (Figueroa 2022). Despite their crucial contribution to local food security, artisanal fishers find themselves in a vulnerable position: they have little formal involvement in fisheries management decisions, and the national emphasis on fishmeal production and valuable seafood exports disproportionately favors industrial fisheries. Even small-scale fishing has the advantage over artisanal fishing in that it might informally enter into the value chain of export commodities (Damonte et al. 2023). These economic processes create and reinforce political imbalances.

The Peruvian governance system for small-scale coastal fisheries is hierarchically organized but, in fact, is mostly an open-access regime (Nakandakari et al. 2017), sparking conflicts around fishing areas and target species. Most strikingly, artisanal fisheries used to share the same legal category as semi-industrial steel purse seiners, allowing fishers with much greater financial capital and technical capacity access to the same fishing zones and state subsidies as artisanal fishers. [Law N°31749](#) now establishes that while the first five nautical miles from the coast are exclusively reserved for artisanal and small-scale fishing, purse seine nets (very common in small-scale and artisanal anchoveta fisheries) can only be used beyond three nautical miles from the coast.

Sources:

- The authors visited La Tortuga and conducted interviews with artisanal fishers on the following occasions: 2014 as part of a thesis work (Espinosa Anaya 2015), 2018 as part of a larger study on the impacts of the 2017 Coastal El Niño (Kluger et al. 2019, 2020), and 2023 with funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 896438.
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Definition of small-scale fisheries

The Peruvian government generally defines artisanal or small-scale fishing as activities carried out by artisanal fisherfolk and shipowners, either with or without boats. Key criteria include a hold capacity of up to 32.6 cubic meters, a length of up to 15 meters, and a predominant reliance on manual labour (Decreto Supremo N° 012-2001-PE). Recent legislation (Law N°31749) categorizes wood raft fisheries as traditional artisanal fishing, specifically carried out in artisanal boats, utilizing only non-destructive and selective non-mechanized fishing methods. Local fishers argue for its recognition as ancestral artisanal fishing (Taller de Socialización de la Ley N° 31749), a designation currently limited to other traditional boats such as reed boats, reed rafts, canoes, and artisanal sailboats.



...The observed efforts by the fishers of La Tortuga require community leaders and a sense of unity, possibly fuelled by a feeling of neglect amidst multiple challenges faced. Importantly, the large majority of the fishers used to come from La Tortuga itself (80%, Grillo 2016), which likely provides ground for solidarity and collective action (Nakandakari et al. 2017). However, recent years have seen repeated waves of immigration, which, together with the out-migration of young local fishers, represents a social and cultural change which might reduce local assertiveness...



Dealing with justice

Sources [cont.]:

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What has stood out in La Tortuga in recent years is the ability of fishers to mobilize and stand up for their own and the town's interests. Their efforts include the following:

- Long-time resistance to a census, citing the legal dispute between the bordering counties and concerns about potential political disadvantages (Espinosa Anaya 2015; Mendoza Bruno 2022);
- Protests in 2018 aimed at the oil and gas company Olympic Peru (2020-02-17-El tiempo) and renegotiation of the easement contract. A group of independent fishers formed the group 'Frente de Defensa de La Tortuga' and reached an agreement that all houses in La Tortuga would receive free gas;
- Lobbying for getting the wooden raft fishery recognized as a traditional ancestral fishery (Taller de Socialización de la Ley N° 31749; and
- Share concerns, together with other fishers, regarding an experimental trawl fishery for yellow-leg shrimp within the five nautical miles zone, arguing that it would harm important habitats and is not consistent with the existing case law (2023-09-25-Memorial-Region-Piura).

In summary, artisanal fishing plays an important role in food security and livelihoods in Peru, and the sector continues to grow (De la Puente et al. 2020). For the future, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of evolving environmental conditions and their socioeconomic effects on dependent fisheries, as well as investigating the individual and cumulative environmental impacts of different fisheries and other sectors. Furthermore, we echo recommendations for other artisanal small-scale fisheries (e.g., De la Puente et al. 2020) to involve the fishers of La Tortuga directly in management and decision-making, support self-governance, social capital and leadership, and expand the access to markets, emergency aid, basic infrastructure, and alternative sources of income.

Photo of La Tortuga. © Sophia Kochalski, 2018



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