

“They want to drive us to extinction”: The influence of rapid Blue Growth on the small-scale fishing communities of La Paz, Mexico



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Barrio El Manglito, one of the two fishing neighbourhoods in La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico, along with ‘El Esterito’ has been substantially impacted by regional policies. Established by relatives of the ‘Yaqui’ people (Sonora, Mexico) during 1930-1940, this community’s ancestors started diving for mollusks after a decline in the pearl extraction in La Paz in the late 1930s. The Yaqui Indigenous group has historically faced injustices by the government (Velázquez-Velázquez 2019; Medina 2022). Most recently, the neighbourhood has been affected by regional policies that favour coastal urban development for housing and tourist activities, which have, in turn, increased environmental pollution and social conflicts (Hernández 2019; Morgan 2023).

For over four generations, the sea has been the lifeblood of Barrio El Manglito. Fishers have used ‘Los Jordanes’ beach for the shelter and maintenance of boats and fishing gear, as well as the landing, processing, and marketing of mollusks, bony and cartilaginous fish. This sandy beach, with its shallow waters and natural protection from hazardous conditions, represents their deep connection to the sea. While all beaches in Mexico are public (Secretaría de Turismo 2020), the local port administration (API) has been granting public spaces to the private sector, increasing the risk of privatization (Peninsular Digital 2022a, b; Morgan 2023) by allowing coastal urban development on the traditional fishing sites without public consultation or considerations regarding pollution and social impacts (Rebolledo-Ramírez 2022).

Most fishers in Barrio El Manglito are organized in fishing cooperatives (Sociedad Cooperativa de Produccion Pesquera Pescadores del Manglito). Over the years, this fishing community has collaborated with several academic and non-governmental organizations on many scientific, cultural, or environmental restoration projects.

Photo: A stranded yacht in the fishing camp after hurricane Norma.
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Location:

El Manglito, Baja California Sur, Mexico

Ecosystem type:

Marine

Main gear:

Gillnet, Hook and Line & Recreational fishing gear

Target species:

Batoids, sharks, bony fish & mollusks

Vessel type:

Fiberglass boats with outboard engines

No. of small-scale fishers:

30

Justice in context

Types of justice:

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

Distributive, Social & Procedural Justice

Coastal urban development limiting the space of traditional working grounds by ignoring public consultation and favouring other sectors such as tourism. The community of Barrio El Manglito has been affected by provincial regulations that legislated the construction of infrastructure on 'Los Jordanes' beach (2015-2021). Three buildings and coastal modifications for a new marina were developed without the fishers' consultation or participation. These buildings affect fishers' space and reduce the capacity for sheltering fishing boats during adverse weather conditions, as evident after Hurricane Norma impacted La Paz on Oct 20-22, 2023 (BCS Noticias 2023, Cota 2023). This lack of space affected the fishers in various ways: boats and fishing equipment were sunk or destroyed (Cota 2023), and a fisher was injured while trying to save his boat. The coastal urban development was recognized – by the newly elected government – as a clear misconduct of the previous administration towards the small-scale fishing community (Sin embargo 2018, BCS Noticias 2021a; El Organismo 2021; Rebolledo-Martínez R 2021).

Regulatory Justice (1)

The bycatch of commercially protected species released intentionally or accidentally by aquaculture. Small-scale fishers may accidentally catch specimens of protected species such as the totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*). These bycatches are unusual and more research need to be developed to understand if these incidental captures are linked to the farming of totoabas in areas adjacent to their traditional fishing sites. These sea farms intentionally release totoaba specimens into the wild, which can be incidentally caught by local small-scale fishers that are not used to their capture, as the distribution of totoaba is characteristic from the upper Gulf of California (Hernández-Tlapale et al. 2020; Valor Compartido 2023). Fishing authorities monitor small-scale fishers and there have been concerns of fishers being harassed by the authorities who don't consider the potential effect of releasing farmed totoabas near the fisher's traditional fishing grounds and outside the native range of totoabas. The lack of coordination between authorities and fishers creates conditions that lead to unfair competition. Some fishers suspect an increase in surveillance or blue conspiracy, which they think could be sponsored by competitors with greater economic power. This affects their fishing and human rights, impacting their ability to market their catch and resulting in them being jailed, as similar conflicts affect other Indigenous groups in conflict with foreign enterprises linked to the Blue Economy (BCS Noticias 2023b).

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Pesca ribereña: A productive activity carried out in coastal ecosystems and inland waters, generally based on a multi-species fishery. It utilizes a smaller vessel, commonly known as a 'panga', which can be a fishing unit with or without an outboard motor. The 'panga' has a maximum overall length of 10.5 meters, and it may or may not have an ice system to preserve the catch. It has a maximum autonomy of 3 days (CONAPESCA, 2011).

Justice in context

Regulatory Justice (2)

Wildlife regulations and interactions with non-commercial protected species that destroy fishing gear. As a consequence of nature conservation policies, small-scale fishing gear could accidentally interact with non-commercial protected species (i.e. white sharks *Carcharodon carcharias*, whale sharks *Rhincodon typus*). The law requires that every white or whale shark be released instantly (dead or alive; DOF 2000). However, no solutions have been devised to compensate fishers for the loss of their gear, which is destroyed by the size, strength, and weight of the sharks. In this regard, environmental regulations do not consider protocols to compensate fishers or initiatives to collaborate in the monitoring and management of threatened species.

Market Justice

Intermediaries affecting the market and the impact of organized crime. Fishers are impacted by intermediaries who decide the price of the fishers' products. Before the pandemic, these intermediaries bought and re-sold seafood products to restaurants. During the pandemic, fishers stopped using intermediaries and looked for alternatives for their subsistence by selling their products within their community 'door by door' (Romero & Díaz 2020). Unfortunately, organized crime was involved as an intermediary after the pandemic, creating unbalanced situations and affecting the local, regional, and international market chain while influencing the health of communities. Due to the lack of opportunities and the influence of cartels, some of the youngest fishers (15-18 years old) have been forced to engage in organized crime (Felbab-Brown 2022; Investigación Zeta 2022).

Environmental Justice

Environmental pollution and impacts on food security by allowing dredging for the access of boats. The Integral Port Administration, along with the Mexican Navy, carried out dredging actions to maintain beach access and build a marina in 2021, affecting local fishers and ignoring their participation in the decision-making processes (El Organismo 2022). After the expression of disapproval by community members, the marina was suspended (BCS Noticias 2021b), but the issues with the pollution persisted. These coastal urban developments were carried out without permits, supervision, or communication with the community (Rebolledo-Ramírez 2021). One year before, there were also dredging actions that polluted traditional fishing grounds and affected some of the fishery's resources of 'El Manglito' (Guízar 2020).

COVID-19 related justice

Drop down in sales due to the pandemic. This community observed a 70% drop in the sale of its products during the pandemic along with a reduction in the fish market value. These losses were linked to the suspension of economic activities and the closure of restaurants. The latter were some of its main clients, in which the sale of the product was achieved through an intermediary. However, fishers stopped selling to intermediaries due to the low value they placed on their products during the pandemic. According to the fishers' estimates, catches were reduced by 30% and there was no funding or support to mitigate these impacts (Romero y Díaz 2020).



The community's resilience was tested during Hurricane Norma in 2023, revealing vulnerabilities due to inadequate infrastructure planning and the encroachment of development on their fishing grounds.



Dealing with Justice

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Distributive, Social & Procedural Justice

Local researchers and journalists have identified impacts related to coastal urban development such as beach modifications and limitations to sea access, which occurred at the expense of relevant social sectors such as small-scale fisheries (El Organismo 2021; Morgan 2023). The previous and current governments (2015-2021; 2021-2027) have made some efforts to engage with the fishers (BCS Noticias 2021b; Peninsular Digital 2022b). However, infrastructure construction without their participation had a negative impact on the beach as well as the community dynamics (Romero 2021; Peninsular Digital 2022a, 2023; Rebolledo-Martínez 2022). In October 2023, the community was severely affected by Hurricane Norma due to the infrastructure built on the upper part of the beach, which was traditionally used to protect boats and gears against adverse weather conditions (Cota 2023).

Regulatory Justice

There are difficulties in reporting and monitoring the incidental capture of protected species linked to ocean farming and/or changes in the species distribution. The fishers do not have clear information about the mechanisms to complete bycatch reports due to suspicions of negative/harmful actions against their fishing activities, such as the restriction of permits and administrative fees that could substantially impact their security and livelihoods.

Environmental Justice

It is unknown if there are efforts to monitor and/or compensate fishers for the dredging on 'Los Jordanes' beach and the modification of their traditional working sites. However, scientists from a regional scientific center (CICIMAR-IPN) and the NGO 'Colectivo de Académicos Sudcalifornianos' have informed the government and public about the high risk of dredging toxic sediments near the fishing camp of El Manglito and other coastal ecosystems of La Paz Bay (Guízar 2020). Nevertheless, the dredging occurred on both occasions. In November 2023, coastal urban pollution was also impacted traditional fishing grounds due to heavy rains during hurricane Norma.

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Coastal urban development has limited the space of traditional working grounds by ignoring public consultation and favouring other sectors such as tourism.

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Dealing with justice

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Market Justice

Fishers were able to find alternatives to stop being dependent on intermediaries (COBI 2021). Unfortunately, the recent impact of organized crime poses serious challenges for the community at the federal and provincial levels, as narco-trafficking is putting their safety and functions to provide food at risk. However, a Mexican navy base is located next to the fishing camp, so direct conflicts are more easily observable and could be prevented due to the navy’s presence. Social research carried out by Felbab-Brown (2022) and Investigación Zeta (2022) shed light on this problem. Nevertheless, it is unclear if there are other efforts to listen to and support the perspective of fishers regarding crucial stressors such as violence, drugs, pollution, gender equality, etc.

COVID-19 related Justice

Fishers stopped being dependent on intermediaries during the pandemic due to the little value they received for their products. The fishers continued subsistence fishing and the selling was done directly to the consumer; some fishers used their own vehicles to sell their products house-to-house to support the community. NGOs like ‘Noroeste Sustentable’ assisted fishers by providing information about subsistence alternatives, such as the manufacture and sale of masks (Vargas-Carballo 2020). In 2021, the NGO Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI) organized a consultation to register the effects of the pandemic on this community (COBI 2021).



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Photo: *Yachts and a panga in El Manglito, Baja California Sur, Mexico.*
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