

# Fishing for crustaceans

This photo-essay depicts the practice of aratu fishing carried out by women in the mangroves of northeastern Brazil

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**A**ratu (*Goniopsis cruentata*) are small, reddish crustaceans that live on the branches of mangroves. They are processed and sold, the sweetness of the meat making them a prized delicacy.

Aratu fishing is carried out mostly by women, for whom it is a source of income, allowing them to get by without formal employment, and offering a certain freedom in their lives.

Unlike the crab, the aratu is a fast breeder but both types of crustaceans have their own pros and cons. “If aratu bred like crab, there wouldn’t be much to pick since there are a lot of people fishing. We’re lucky that it reproduces fast. Crab is less labour intensive and fetches more money. Aratu has to be picked before it is sold; crab doesn’t need any such processing”

Aratu are fast moving crustaceans and require stillness and patience to capture. They move with the tide, and to catch them fisherwomen need to have an intimate knowledge of the local mangroves and tides. Aratu fishing requires special skills. The capacity to remain almost immobile and the choice of the right spot in the mangroves are crucial for success. Trying to fish in a spot recently harvested would be fruitless, and so the fisherwomen first inspect a site closely for marks and signs that indicate recent harvesting by other fishers. The fisherwomen then enter the lagoon and begin to move ahead in a circle as they fish. If there are men in the area, the women usually move to another location.

This photo essay depicts the way of life of the aratu fisherwomen as well as the production processes they follow. The fisherwomen shown here are led by Elialda Avelino, a leader of the Puxim do Sul community, who is always joined by two or three co-workers who may be family members or neighbours, since aratu fishing in the mangroves is never done alone.

The engine was acquired by the community about five years ago. As a result, travel time decreased and the fishing territory increased. Fishing however is most viable when there are four people to split fuel costs.

It is a long journey to find the ideal fishing spot, typically, a mangrove that has still “not been fished”, that is, it was not harvested the

previous night. Places with bee hives are strictly avoided. The choice of fishing site is usually left to the most experienced fisherwoman in the group.

Entering the mangrove requires knowledge and attention. You must wear special clothes to protect yourself from insects, special socks and shoes to facilitate walking and balancing on the roots of the mangrove, and a meticulous search to decide where to start fishing.

## Why fish aratu?

“Crab brings in more money but is hard work; more suitable for men! Blue crab is lighter but it only appears from time to time. Aratu is present all year round. It suits women more. Men don’t like it, they prefer the crab.”

Attracting the aratu is an activity best done alone, and so the fisherwomen separate while fishing. Just as the movement of the human body drives the aratu away, certain stimuli attract them, including bait - usually small crabs called almofala (*Aratus pisonii*), the bark of trees, and also certain sounds – for example, the sound of whistling. Many fisherwomen have reported that in the mangroves as they fish in silence for aratu, they feel as if all their problems disappear. The stillness necessary to attract the creatures appears to bring peace into the lives of the aratu women as well.

Fifty aratus are needed for a yield of half a kilogram of processed product. Daily production varies between half and two kilos a day in winter, and may reach up to eight kilos a day during the best fishing period, which is summer. Journey time to reach fishing spots in the mangrove may take four to six hours.

Much more work and time are required in the post harvest phase. The aratus are cooked right after fishing, and then their shells are removed. This work may go on well into the night with a kilo of aratu taking up to two hours to process.

The price of a kilo depends on the time of year. In the summer, when production is higher, the price is around R\$ 20.00 (5 USD).

The residual shells are used as fertiliser and chicken feed.

The women report that yields have been declining. In the last 20 years, the practice of



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Entering the mangrove, choosing the fishing location. Entering the mangrove requires knowledge and attention. You must wear special clothes to protect yourself from insects; special socks and shoes to facilitate walking and balancing on the roots of the mangrove





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How to attract aratu?. Many fisherwomen have reported that in the mangroves as they fish in silence for aratu, they feel as if all their problems disappear. The stillness necessary to attract the creatures appears to bring peace into the lives of the aratu women as well





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night fishing using lights, carried out mainly by men, although prohibited in the Management Agreement of the Protected Marine Area Canavieiras Resex, has grown.

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[Note: The images are part of the research study 'Political ecology of crustacean fishing in mangroves in northeastern Brazil', which was carried out over the last three years (2017-2020) by the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation in the Protected Marine Areas for Sustainable Use (Resex) in Northeast Brazil. This essay is based in the Resex of Canavieiras, Southern Bahia, Brazil.] ❏