

“We are artisanal fishers, not criminals”

The small-scale fishers of a famous beach in Peru defend the ecosystem and its biodiversity through responsible and sustainable selective fishing

I am a small-scale fisherman working the beach of Bujama Baja. It lies in Mala district of the Cañete province in Peru’s Lima department. I have been plying my trade for 34 years, fully engaged in the only livelihood I was given by God: the sea. I am registered with the authorities under the number CO-15443290-BM. To friends and family, I am just Alejandro Bravo Avalos.

The Bujama Baja beach has been a fishing ground for a very long time; local fisherfolk live in small huts here. At some point, people from the capital began building summer houses on the beach, alienating and displacing the local population. The newcomers tried to intimidate and displace us with their economic and political power in the 1990s. The illiterate, powerless locals—our grandparents—felt this was an abuse of power. They insisted on educating us. Many local residents supported us.

In recent years, we created the Asociación Gremio de Pescadores Artesanales (Artisanal Fisher’s Association Guild) of San Pedro de Bujama Baja, registered in Mala. It continues the legacy of the local maritime workers’ organization created in the 1930s. We represent a new generation of fishers resisting widespread abuse of power in order to maintain our presence in all types of fishery operations. Through a continuous dialogue, we have managed to reach a long-term agreement with the owners of second homes in the area.

Sometimes I take part in deep-sea fishing, targeting dolphinfish, squid, giant squid, marlin, swordfish, sharks, skates or flying fish. The season for deep-sea fishing opens in September-October to close in June-July, when

strong winds force most of the artisanal fleet to stay in the harbour. This is the time for boat maintenance; we fix and paint our vessels to keep them operational. Coastal fishing in sand or rocky areas continues round the year at low tide, when sea currents and winds are weaker. We use sand crabs for bait; their population has declined considerably. In the rest of the country, anchoveta is the most common bait. Industrial fisheries use their power to pressure on the government ministries,

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insisting on permits to fish even the smallest fish. This predatory practice should not be permitted. But industrial fishers continue ruthlessly, without any fear or shame.

Sense and sustainability

When Raul Perez Reyes Espejo was the minister of production, we were part of a working group created to consolidate all our fishing activities. We hope to resume the working group with the incumbent minister, Ana Maria Choquehuanca. We wish to stop fishing inspectors from penalizing our fishing operations and confiscating our catches during transport towards the fishing terminals in Lima and Callao. This worsens the declining catches because of extreme weather in the form of winds, currents and tides, increasing in

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frequency. We also struggle against the competition from rogue fishers from other harbours; their illegal fishing practices continue in the absence of law enforcement from harbour authorities and ministry officials.

Industrial fishing vessels are never inspected, disciplined, sanctioned or fined. Industrial fleets deplete anchoveta stocks when they catch undersized fish. They deplete stocks of other species, too, such as tuna, horse mackerel, mackerel, sea bass and comber, besides marine birds, mammals and other aquatic resources. Yet a presidential decree protects their predatory practices. Anchoveta is the basis of the food chain, the primary source of our livelihood. Even some industrial fishers have denounced this unsustainable situation, posting on social media pictures of seine nets completely full of small anchoveta.

Small-scale fisheries (SSF) are not that lucky. Our slightest fishing irregularity is penalized. If we do not

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pay the fine, our fishing gear is seized. Artisanal fishers are sent to prison, compelled to pay compensation to the State or forced to report to the Public Prosecutor Office once every month. I wish everyone in Peru and in the whole world knows that our woes start when an ignorant inspector reports that a small-scale fisher or vessel owner is obstructing justice. They force the fisher to sign their sentences without actually reading them. This indignity leaves us feeling terrible. We are simply artisanal fishermen. We are not criminals.

The Ministers often, end up defending industrial fishing as best they can, following a jargon-filled script. They pay lip service to “empowering small-scale fishers”, but never try to implement any empowerment programme. In practice,

as soon as a minister shows a favourable disposition to our plea, he is swiftly fired and cast aside.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we, small-scale fishers took the responsibility of feeding our people, even without any support or capacity-building by the State at the central, regional or local levels. Faced with the threat of starvation for our children, women and elderly, we undertook the risky and heroic task of providing sustenance for the national population, providing special care for pregnant women, children and elderly people at affordable prices. Falling back on ancestral traditional knowledge, we prepared medicinal drinks with ginger, onion, eucalyptus, rosemary, thyme or lemon, as well as fish-based foods using tuna, mackerel, horse mackerel or anchoveta. We also resorted to social distancing, even before the authorities propagated it.

COVID-19 was an invisible enemy. It made us look hard at the central government; we realized it was incapable of dealing with the situation. We were horrified by the profiteering at the time of a grave crisis—the rising of prices; the misuse of important resources in disregard of the suffering masses; the diversion of funds to keep afloat certain companies that had declared bankruptcy; the sight of pharmacies and hospitals making big profits at the cost of our own lives. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inefficiency and total incompetence all around.

Fish barter

The SSF organizations in our country were most affected because their members lack harbour or landing facilities. We were cruelly left to our own devices and told to stay at home, with markets and restaurants closed and no customers to buy our produce. When we managed to get out and catch some fish to feed our families. Taking good care avoid the army’s scrutiny, we took the opportunity to barter fish for other essential products like sweet potato, manioc, potato, noodles, oil or sugar. We adapted. Now we claim recognition for our heroic service, for risking our lives to feed the country.



Guitar Fish caught by members of the San Pedro de Bujama Baja - Mala Artisanal Fishermen's Guild Association, Peru. We represent a new generation of fishers resisting widespread abuse of power in order to maintain our presence in all types of fishery operations

What we get, instead, is the indifference of public authorities.

The government poured millions into the Reactiva Peru initiative, giving non-refundable grants to big companies that then hurried to declare bankruptcy. It also offered loans of 2,000 nuevos soles (US \$520), through the National Fund for Fisheries Development (FONDEPES), but that only reached 10 per cent of the fishers. Small grants of 500 nuevos soles (US \$130) reached a little more than 40,000 small-scale fishers and other disadvantaged groups. At the end of the day, most of us fisherfolk did not receive any help at all.

In the past we have had to fight other disasters. For example, chicken production companies ran campaigns claiming that diseases like cholera came from fish. Then, we stopped fishing but the cholera outbreak went on,

even worsened. Our traditional fishing techniques are highly selective. Consider the case of capturing grunt; when we started, nobody wanted to buy this fish. With the little proceeds obtained from selling at low prices, we were able to trade with our farmers, and bring home a healthy diet for our families.

In times of economic hardship in every corner of the world, small-scale fishers have always absorbed shocks. We are aware that economic flows must never stop. But governments should also be aware that it is not fair to let a handful of families own all the resources included in the 200-mile maritime zone. Or even give them permission to enter and fish within the 5-mile zone, regardless of the danger of getting stuck in shallow waters, using seine nets to catch anchoveta and other species.

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They are destroying ecosystems, reducing biodiversity, and sowing the seeds of famine and devastation in our communities in the southern part of the country. We are ready to sacrifice our lives to defend the five-mile coastal zone as breeding grounds and a source of food for local communities. The dire forecasts of global hunger by 2030 is already being felt among our communities. Our pockets are empty, our plates are empty. Our families lack the bare essentials needed for a basic livelihood.

Currently, we are also facing the attempts of the National Fishery Association to lobby the minister of production to reduce the minimum permitted size for the capture of anchoveta. We find this unacceptable. We will not tolerate regulations that

stakeholders in SSF to find solutions, to promote sustainable fisheries production and consumption. Launched in 2022 by the Artisanal Fishers Association Guild of San Pedro de Bujama, of which I am a member and representative, it includes SSF representatives, famous chefs from restaurants such as La Mar, Maido, Shizen and Piscis, and other stakeholders from the seafood value chain. It draws support from an advisory group led by the Future of Fish, along with NGOs such as WWF, SPDA, and public institutions and networks like Produce and SERNANP (National programme for the Promotion of Seafood).

Recently, the group approved the 'Criteria for Responsible Fishing and Consumption'. It is now preparing its rules of procedure, as well as a capacity-building plan for members and candidates. The guild is also running pilot projects to develop direct sales to restaurant members of the Good Fishing initiative, hoping to make them operational by February 2024. We hope these pilot projects will bring our fishers better income. We also aim at increasing consumer awareness about how and where the fish is caught, by whom, and the freshness of the product—all the information consumers need to learn about responsible production and consumption.

These pilot projects include capacity building on business development, product quality and other associated matters, in order to make sure the product supplied is legal, selective and safe. We will keep defending responsible production and consumption of seafood in Peru, working together with restaurants and other stakeholders of our value chain who share the same principle: responsible fishing for the sake of future generations. 

perpetuate predatory practices, spelling disaster for the artisanal fishers of our country. Besides, the ocean is not a rubbish dump. We must bring back to land all the rubbish we generate on board our fishing vessels, as well as collect any waste we happen to find at sea. Let us protect the sea, not just in Peru but all over the world, as it is our main source of life and livelihood.

Stewardship, common sense

We small-scale fishers respect reproductive and fishing closures, in the face of the changes in ecosystems and biodiversity generated by climate change. We follow the development of the El Niño phenomenon along the coast of Ecuador: if this were to happen closer to our coastline, hunger and devastation would be inevitable. We have always defended—and will always defend—the ecosystem and its biodiversity by practising healthy, sustainable fisheries.

Consider the 'Good Fishing' initiative, a call to action for all

For more

Peru's Small-Scale Fishers

<https://www.perc.org/2017/02/10/perus-small-scale-fishers/>

Growing Into Poverty: Reconstructing Peruvian Small-Scale Fishing Effort Between 1950 and 2018

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2020.00681/full>

Peru's Artisanal fishermen and entrepreneurs seek to build new sustainable business models

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/06/08/pescadores-artesanales-emprendedoras-y-emprendedores-buscan-construir-nuevos-modelos-de-negocios-sostenibles>