Small-Scale Fisheries versus Whale-Watching Tourism: The Story of Puerto López

María José Barragán Paladines

Summary

More often than not, fish and fisheries are seen as commodified assets in a market-driven economy and have rarely been understood in terms of their cultural and historical dimensions. However, small-scale fisheries are still highly relevant for fishing communities which have abandoned the activity in search of more profitable businesses (e.g., tourism). This situation has affected fishers, who are losing their livelihood and their way of life, and has compromised their access to fish as food, and hence their food sovereignty. Consequently, the future generation's ability to meet their needs without fishing is at risk. This article discusses small-scale fisheries, the intergenerational ethics behind their practice, and how these are connected with the food sovereignty discourse.



The Ecuadorian coast with fishing boats, Puerto López

Photo taken by Maria Jose Barragan-Paladines

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Fish market Puerto López, Manabí Province, Ecuador

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Fishing is not *cool!* in the eyes of the young generations in Puerto López. Since the late 1990s this small fishing village on the Ecuadorian coast has systematically lost its long-standing fishing industry, which can be traced back to as early as 6,000 BC. In fact, there is abundant evidence that people in this area have long depended on fish and seafood (e.g., mahi-mahi, shells, and octopus) as a source of food, in particular protein. After 1950, small-scale commercial fishing in Puerto López started to greatly contribute to the local economy as a source of income. In the years that followed, this activity maintained its economic relevance, together with its social role as a bonding element for the entire community. For instance, multiple social groups were integrated in fishing-related activities, such as young people and elders taking part in disembarking and handling, women participating in evisceration and cleaning, and women, elders, and children joining in the post-harvest activities (e.g., trade and fixing gear). This integration critically determined local identity building and helped maintain cohesive elements within the local society. Over the past two decades, whale-watching tourism has arrived in the area and there has been a shift away from fishing in Puerto López. Issues of food sovereignty—regarding fish as food—have become important, due to the lower availability of fish for local consumption as a result of the reduction in small-scale

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fishing, including a smaller fleet and smaller crews. This article centers around the notion of fish as food in Puerto López, and around the shift away from fishing and towards activities connected with whale-watching tourism.



Small-scale fishing gear, Puerto López, Manabí Province, Ecuador

Photo: M. J. Barragán Paladines. 2013

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The 1997 El Niño event hit both the emerging tourist industry and the traditional fishing sector, which suffered major impacts as increased water temperatures resulted in a lack of fish. A year later, biological research found that humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), a migratory species, were using the surrounding marine area to mate, breed, and nurse on an annual basis. A group of local tourism-related bodies then launched the "whale festival." This initiative was intended to attract tourists' attention to the area and to improve the struggling local economy. However, the direct consequence of this boom was not only the increasing number of tourists coming every year to watch the breeding whales; the blossoming profitable activity also attracted many people working in the already-depressed fishery sector, and especially awakened fishers' interest in a new and promising source of economic income. In the following years, whale-watching-related businesses and infrastructure expanded rapidly and a large number of fishers shifted to working in this new form of marine nature-based tourism. At the same time, the whale-watching activity was strongly supported by the conservation discourses and propaganda of local and international NGOs, who, concerned about instances of sea turtle and marine mammal bycatch, perceived fishing as an environmentally unfriendly activity. The result of this trend was the strengthening of the

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regulations regarding marine protected areas while failing to take into account the social and cultural role of fisheries in the local community.



Fishermen in Puerto López, Ecuador

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Fishermen on a boat in Puerto López

Photo taken by Maria Jose Barragan-Paladines.

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This was part of a widespread dissociation between the natural and social systems. To remedy this, in 2008, the new Ecuadorian Constitution was approved, incorporating the guiding principle of *sumak kawsay* . This Amerindian cosmovision of equilibrium centers around the harmonic coexistence of beings from the social and natural realms, and privileges the collective over the individual and solidarity over competition. In line with this, the constitution recognizes the rights of nature as a subject of juridical protection. However, it is still unclear how the long tradition of fishing in Puerto López—considered to be "small-scale" based on the type of boats (maximum length of 10 m) and fishing gear (e.g., gillnets, long-liners, hook-and-line) used—is covered by this new normative approach. In fact, after the abandonment of fishery activities, an important part of local identity has been lost, the role of fishing as providing a source of livelihood has been forgotten, and the critical role of fishing and fishers in the fish-as-food chain has been ignored.

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Fishing in Puerto López, Ecuador

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The implications of this story are varied. The first falls under the dimension of food sovereignty by directly threatening people's access to food and nutritious diets, their right to protect the local production and consumption of fish, and their influence in the fish market, with the consequent inability to keep fish as food local. Second, the reduced (or absent) food sovereignty of local communities illustrates the complexity, diversity, dynamics, and scale of fishery systems. This means that successful implementation of the constitutional principle of *sumak kawsay* urgently requires a more comprehensive understanding of both natural and social systems. The existing interactions between humans and fish, and among humans for fish, must be considered in terms of intergenerational ethics when asking, for instance, to what extent whale-watching tourism has successfully achieved either a reduction of poverty or the enhancement of well-being in the local fishing community. Rather than simply enforcing tourism development as beneficial for the entire Puerto López community, deeper reflections about the viability of fishing for future generations are needed. I argue that it is not possible to alleviate poverty among fishers without food security, and that there can be no food security without food sovereignty. Thus, comprehensive policies, ethical foundations, and honest arguments are needed in order to find synchrony and coherence between ideas and actions to succeed in achieving the aims of *sumak kawsay*.

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Further readings:

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María José Barragán-Paladines obtained a PhD in Geography at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's, Canada. After her bachelor's degree in biological sciences, she pursued a MSc degree in Sustainable Resource Management at the Technical University of Munich, Germany, where she addressed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and wildlife management. Later, a shift in her interests and research focus took her to Canada where she brought together the human dimensions perspective and the interactive governance approach, applied to marine resources governance and protected areas settings. In past years she conducted research about MPAs governance (e.g., Galapagos Marine Reserve) in the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, integrating small-scale fisheries, tourism, and coastal-marine resources and communities. She was formerly involved with the Too Big to Ignore (TBTI) Project–Global Partnership for Small-scale fisheries Research. Currently, she is a Post-Doctoral researcher in the "Development and Knowledge Sociology" Working Group at the Leibniz Centre for Tropical Marine Research, ZMT, in Bremen, Germany. Her current research focus concerns governance of coastal-marine resources in Latin America, with special attention to the small-scale fishing resources and fishing communities. She can be reached at mariaj.barraganp@leibniz-zmt.de.

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