

Centering Indigenous and Community Fisheries in Global Fisheries Governance

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SUMMARY This brief places Indigenous fisheries, knowledge systems, and sovereignty at the forefront of conversations on new global fisheries governance. A political-ecology framing offers insight into the causes of overfishing and how to address them. The brief outlines the importance of balancing the interests and concerns of Indigenous and community fisheries in policy decisions; it also provides suggestions for how to accomplish this critical goal.

The United Nations (UN) High Seas Treaty and the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies have recently placed a spotlight on the global fisheries commons. Policymakers should focus on the key considerations learned from decades of study of the root causes of overfishing and on a reframing of the dominant solutions proposed. Knowledge systems of Indigenous community fisheries and sovereignty of Indigenous communities should be considered in designing mechanisms for governing the global fisheries commons.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

First, we must adopt a political-ecology framing to understand the problem of overfishing and its solutions. Overfishing is often described as a problem of lack of property rights and individual self-interest leading to the tragedy of commons and overfishing. When the problem is framed in this way, the solutions are designed accordingly. But this framing dispossesses many fishing peoples and communities from their fishing livelihoods and degrades successful common-property institutions that have sustainably and justly managed fisheries for millennia.¹

Elinor Ostrom and other scholars of common-property institutions have studied across cultures to document how people have formed governance institutions to effectively manage common-pool resources like fisheries.² We see the problem of overfishing (and



the solutions) differently if we draw on this commons scholarship, as well as on the work of some political ecologists.³ These political ecologists understand the problem of overfishing as one of industrialization and capitalization of fisheries (while tying in important links to colonialism and fisheries science).⁴

Becky Mansfield⁵ has outlined how the processes of industrialization relate to global overfishing, addressing

- the uneven flow of fish and wealth from the global south to the global north;
- the massive scale of industrial fisheries;
- governmental policies and subsidies for modernizing fisheries;
- small-scale fisheries displaced by industrial fleets; and
- pressure to overfish caused by capitalist fishing and lack of livelihood and employment opportunities in many previously fishing-dependent regions.

Regarding the first point, it is remarkable that about 40 percent of seafood products are traded internationally (in 2022 this totaled US\$151 billion, or 20 times the amount traded in the 1970s) and that approximately 75 percent of fish exports travel from the global south to the global north. A handful of importer countries account for most of the consumption (EU, 34 percent; US, 15 percent; China, 10 percent; and Japan, 9 percent).⁶

In sum, Mansfield writes:

Despite these fatal problems, the tragedy of the commons remains popular as an explanatory framework. This is because it is so simple and because it blames all people equally. In doing so, it allows us to avoid thorny political questions, such as about who gets to make decisions, whose lives matter more, and who benefits from both using and conserving fish and the ecosystems that produce them. But by avoiding these political issues, property-based approaches show themselves to be *highly* political. They are part of a western, capitalist model of development that ignores history and politics by naturalizing overfishing as a problem of human nature that can be solved through capitalist markets. In the end they promote privatization as a way of further intensifying the market-relation in fisheries, and through that encourage increased industrial control of fishing. A better approach would be to promote the many small-scale fisheries that appear to be more equitable and environmentally friendly.⁷

Second, we must uplift Indigenous, small-scale fisheries and fishing-dependent places. Governance mechanisms for Indigenous, small-scale, and community-based fisheries have existed for millennia, and these fisheries must be protected and encouraged if we are to have healthy fisheries for the future. Indigenous peoples number nearly 400 million across 70 countries; they have unique cultures and worldviews distinct from those of the dominant societies that have colonized, occupied, and settled in their territories.⁸

Indigenous fisheries reflect deep knowledge systems and culturally important relationships between people and fish that in many cases span millennia.

As the recent Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Duke University publication *Illuminating Hidden Harvests* (IHH) reveals, small-scale fisheries make up at least 40 percent of the global fisheries' catch and provide income for 60.2 million people—90 percent of all fisheries employment.⁹ An estimated 53 million more people are engaged in subsistence fisheries and have nutritional, cultural, and livelihood attachments to fisheries and fishery-dependent places. The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication¹⁰ note that holistic management and transformational approaches are needed, and these guidelines provide recommendations for strengthening small-scale fisheries through participatory and community-based policies and legal frameworks.¹¹ Fisheries contribute far more than food and economic income, so diverse data sets, including social and cultural data, are needed to manage fisheries sustainably and fairly. The *Illuminating Hidden Harvests* report highlights the central ongoing challenge:

The present IHH report highlights the true nature of small-scale fisheries, which are far more than just an economic subsector, but a livelihood and cultural system that remains undervalued and neglected. Small-scale fisheries communities and Indigenous Peoples play a major role in the food system and in other areas, such as coastal management, local economies, environmental protection, and sustainable use of marine and aquatic resources. Above all, they guarantee food security for a huge number of people. However, their role is still overlooked, and many governments fail to see the diverse benefits provided by small-scale fisheries from an economic, cultural, social or nutritional point of view. The lack of such recognition can lead to an inability to address the negative impact that certain policies, economic investments and conservation measures have on the rights of small-scale fishers, by excluding them from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives and livelihoods.¹²

Last and most importantly, consideration of Indigenous fisheries, knowledge systems, and sovereignty must be front and center in new global fisheries governance. Recent scholarship highlights the role of Indigenous fisheries governance for the future sustainability and fairness of global fisheries.¹³ It is critical to uphold Indigenous sovereignty and rights and to make space for the equal consideration of Indigenous knowledge systems alongside Western science in international and national negotiations around new fisheries development and policies.¹⁴ As Elinor Ostrom and other scholars of the commons note, local autonomy is critical to improving fisheries governance,¹⁵ yet sovereign Indigenous nations often confront serious challenges to asserting their right to manage their fisheries.

Many science and governance systems related to fisheries fail to include Indigenous peoples, knowledge systems, and governance values and protocols, to the detriment of ecological health and human well-being. These failures are evident in Alaska and the North Pacific and in many regions across the globe. For example, along the banks of the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers in recent years, smokehouses and drying racks have lain empty as the vital lifeblood of Yup'ik and Athabascan villages—Chinook and chum

salmon—failed to return home. Meanwhile, out in the Bering Sea, industrial fisheries continued to harvest salmon as bycatch: over 12,000 Chinook salmon and nearly 600,000 chum salmon were caught as trash and thrown overboard in 2021.¹⁶ There continues to be no bycatch limit for chum salmon in these trawl fisheries, while villages along the Yukon River are prevented from harvesting salmon, their cultural lifeblood.

As if these pressures were not enough, the COVID-19 pandemic brought into stark relief the food sovereignty challenges of Alaska Native villages. Many villages rely on traditional hunting and fishing in a broken system of state and federal management that largely fails to recognize and uphold tribal sovereignty and perpetuates harm through the imposition of political values and governance systems profoundly out of alignment with their own values, practices, and knowledge systems.¹⁷ As in many settler nations elsewhere, there continues to be persistent institutional racism and structural violence against Alaska Native peoples and their tribal sovereignty.

As one example, Alaska Native hunters and fishers are regularly criminalized for continuing their hunting and fishing practices—their way of life. In 2012, more than 55 people were issued citations for fishing in their homelands along the Kuskokwim River, and their nets were seized or destroyed.¹⁸ The widespread privatization of the right to fish in Alaska is another example disproportionately affecting fishing access for Indigenous peoples.¹⁹ The lack of consideration for social and cultural dimensions of fishery systems in fisheries policy has led to the pervasive push to privatize fishing access to maximize profit and efficiency. The dispossession of Alaska Native fishing rights has been pronounced yet largely unnoticed or explained away as resulting from various pathologies of Alaska Native villages rather than from inappropriate policies.²⁰

A PATH FORWARD

As new global fisheries agreements are negotiated, Indigenous nations must be included with their full sovereign rights respected. Social and cultural dimensions and protections for community-based small-scale fishing livelihoods must be included. Centering these considerations for Indigenous and community fisheries in the governance of the global fisheries commons is no small task. A transformative approach—one that recognizes the root causes that have prevented sustainable and equitable management—necessitates confronting the political challenges of the status quo. Those “thorny political questions”²¹ must be front and center. How is the uneven flow of benefits and costs of past fisheries-development policies affected by new agreements? How will space be made to include Indigenous nations as rights holders and their knowledge systems as valid? How will community small-scale fisheries and fishing-dependent places be protected?

Recent international and Arctic negotiations provide an example of how to move forward effectively and equitably. The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) highlights the importance of Inuit relationships and knowledge when negotiating international treaties such as the UN High Seas Treaty and those involving the Central Arctic Ocean. “The co-production of knowledge must be developed in a way that is consistent

with Inuit and other Indigenous peoples as rights holders—and knowledge holders—in every aspect of research and related activities,” said Sara Olsvig, the ICC’s international chair. “Indigenous knowledge is necessary for addressing the inter-related ocean, biodiversity and climate change crises.”²²

This ICC example is an important starting point but remains incomplete. More clearly weaving the UN’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into the fabric of the global fisheries governance regime is an important step toward more meaningful inclusion of Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems. This would also promote the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to improve human and environmental well-being. Any future directions for global fisheries governance must center fairness, justice, and livelihood considerations for Indigenous peoples and their fisheries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Courtney Carothers is a Professor of Fisheries in the College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She holds a PhD in environmental anthropology from the University of Washington. Her current work is centered on transforming fisheries education, research, and governance to center and elevate Indigenous perspectives, including developing the Tamamta program, which supports several cohorts of Indigenous and allied students to pursue their graduate degrees in fisheries and marine sciences. She is also contributing to deep relational work to advance dialogues on racial equity and transformation in Alaska. She continues research on the social and cultural dimensions of fishery systems, including important long-term ethnographic research of the social and community impacts of fisheries access privatization.

ABOUT THE SERIES

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NOTES

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