

2022 UN Ocean Conference – PLENARY SESSION

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“Fishers are the first scientists of the sea. We’ve looked after it for generations, and this is why we should be the first people consulted”.

These are not my words, they’re the words of Felicito Nunez, a representative of small-scale fishers from Honduras, speaking yesterday here in Lisbon.

I’m privileged to be here on this stage, in front of you. But I’m sorry it’s me and not Felicito.

It should really be him talking to you, because his experience matters.

Half a billion people depend in some way on small-scale fisheries. Small-scale fishers are the biggest group of ocean users by far. Yet they are so often marginalised from decision making.

Lavinia, from Fiji, told us here that “as coastal communities, we’re entirely dependent on fisheries and we’re united to sustainably manage our oceans to feed ourselves and our nations.”

And they are. Community-led management of marine areas has proven time and again to be efficient, effective, equitable and scalable in Fiji and coastal states all over the world.

Hafiz, who’s with us here from Indonesia, shared that small-scale fishers are forced to compete with industrial giants in their own waters.

Hafiz would tell you how hard it is for coastal communities to survive alongside vessels that destroy everything in their path. We know it doesn't have to be this way. There is a future in which oceans and fishers can both thrive.

This week, Lavinia, Felicito, Hafiz and dozens of small-scale fishers from every ocean are calling on you, in this room, to take bold steps to make this vision a reality.

It starts by listening to the biggest group of ocean users.

It means securing preferential access for small scale fishers to the waters on which they depend.

It means no longer defending inherently destructive fishing gears like bottom trawling, that are incompatible with a net zero world.

It means prioritising local food and job security – including for women – above all competing interests in the ocean economy.

And it means supporting frontline communities to deal with the climate emergency that is now the lived reality for so many.

Rebuilding fisheries and restoring our oceans starts with people.

Because there's nothing small about small-scale fishers. They're a hundred million strong and provide nutrition to billions.

They have the most at stake, and they have the knowledge and global reach needed to reshape humanity's relationship with our ocean.

Helping them achieve this is the most powerful thing we can do to keep our ocean alive.