

UN Ocean Conference
Lisbon, Portugal
27 June to 1 July 2022

Turning the tide: protecting the rights of small-scale fishers (SSFs)

Half a billion people – 7% of the global population – are at least partly dependent on small-scale fisheries for food, employment and income. Small-scale fishers are the largest group of ocean users. They have contributed the least to the ocean emergency, yet are among the most affected by it. They stand to lose the most from collapsing fisheries, and to gain the most from conservation success. Living and working on the frontlines of our changing ocean, they can be the most effective guardians of its biodiversity.

Yet small-scale fishers have long been marginalised by large corporate interests and excluded from major policy discussions that directly affect their lives and livelihoods. They have often been powerless to prevent their fishing grounds from being devastated by industrial destructive fisheries, such as bottom trawlers, or leased to aquaculture and mining companies. Faced with such uncertainty, fishers are competing to catch all they can before it runs out. A race to the bottom ensues, deepening poverty and food insecurity, and decimating biodiverse and productive food systems that support hundreds of millions of people.

But we can turn the tide. Social movements putting people and SSF at the heart of conservation are spreading globally. Compelling examples from dozens of countries show that successful models for sustainable fisheries like Locally Managed Marine Areas, Preferential Access Areas and Inshore Exclusion Zones can deliver benefits for people and nature. Now is the time for these schemes to go global.

We call on the leaders of every country and their representatives at the UN Ocean Conference to put people at the centre of our ocean recovery by:

- Including coastal communities and small-scale fishers' organisations in decision-making spaces
- Enshrining human rights in ocean conservation
- Securing the tenure rights of SSF
- Granting preferential access areas for artisanal fishers to put equity and social justice at the heart of marine spatial planning
- Addressing the underlying drivers of resource degradation and biodiversity loss

Coexistence between people and our ocean is entirely possible, but can only be achieved at scale with the full engagement of those who depend most on it.

Now more than ever we need to recognise the role of SSF not as mere passive victims of the ecological and climate emergencies, but as legitimate, effective stewards who can help safeguard ocean resilience.