

Here to Stay!

An account of a press conference organized at the meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Colombia, to discuss fisherfolk in action

The sixteenth meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP16) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was held in Cali, Colombia, from October 21 to November 1, 2024. On the third day of COP16, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) held a press conference. It was titled 'Fisher Peoples in Action: A Human Rights-Based Approach to Achieve the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) targets in Coastal and Marine Conservation'. Its hosts were representatives of small-scale fishers and their organizations. The conference was moderated by Vivienne Solis. The following fifteen representatives spoke at the conference: Jesus Chaves, Costa Rica; Minfer Perez, Colombia; Alfonso Simon, Panama; Marta Machazek, Panama; Zoila Bustamante, Chile; German Hernandez, Honduras; Eduardo Mercado, Panama; Aaron Chacon, Costa Rica; Lazaro Mecha, Panama; Libia Arcinieges, Colombia; Luis Perea, Colombia; Julian Medina, Colombia; Albert Chang, TICCAS, Flavio Lontro, Brazil and Rungrueang Rahmanyah, Thailand.

The following text is the edited transcript of the press conference:

[Vivienne Solis (VS) speaks]: We are very happy to be here because we are going to talk about small-scale fishermen and women around the world. These people represent 40 per cent of the marine and continental fishing carried out in the world. Up to 45 million women depend on small-scale fishing and 50 million depend, at least partially, on small-scale fishing.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recognizes, for the first time in history, the human rights—the fundamental principles for life—of a sector that has long been absent from most discussions regarding the sea. We count on you so that your message of peace, your message of life, your message oriented towards participation in the decisions and decision-making regarding the oceans, also counts among the huge discussions that are taking place here for the conservation of the sea. Let's listen.

[VS]: What is the opinion of small-scale fishers on conservation?

My name is Jesus Chavez. I am a small-scale fisher and a co-ordinator of the Responsible Fishing and Marine Territories Network in Costa Rica. Within the framework of biodiversity, we are not against conservation because we are part of it. But we have a message: we cannot do conservation without people. And we are there. We are the people who are there. We do not accept to be displaced from our marine spaces. We have acquired rights through time.

I am Rungrueang Rahmanyah from Thailand. I am very pleased to meet and get to know fishers from many countries.

*The transcript of the video (<https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k15/k15icg47f5>) prepared by Mythili DK (mythilidk@ramdk.com), Independence Researcher based in Chennai, India; with inputs from **Ronald Rodriguez** (rrodriguez.icsf@gmail.com), Programme Officer, ICSF*

And I would like to support what we are doing. And I think that our fishers are the food producers of this world.

My name is Minfer Perez. I am a representative of small-scale fishing in Colombia. Small-scale fishing in the world is facing great threats today. Among them is displacement and the loss of our fishing territories. The violation of rights, such as the right to decent work, lack of access to health and social security, and the lack of access to economic funds to strengthen the small-scale fishing sector, these are some of the other problems we face. Also, contamination resulting from exploitation of hydrocarbons in the sea. Today we make only one demand at a global level for small-scale fishing. And that is that governments give us participation in decision making. That they listen to us. That we are recognized...as small-scale fishers, as the main actors in the conservation of marine biodiversity, of which we are a part.

My name is Julian Medina. I am a legal representative of the Colombian ethnic fishing network. The main threats that we as fishers face are expansion of the commercial fishing industry, destruction of mangrove forests, sedimentation of swamps, and bleaching of corals due to climate change and pollution. Each of these contributes to the degradation of coastal marine ecosystems. The productivity of fishers is being threatened. Therefore, we have a food insecurity in the territories. Governance must be given back to the fishing communities.

Let's take an example. What is happening in the territory? Alfonso, could you tell us what is happening?

My name is Alfonso Simon. I come from Panama, from the indigenous region called Ngabe-Bugle. I want to make public to this crowd that is present today at COP16 that in 2010, we, the indigenous people of Ngabe-Bugle, were excluded without any consent, consultation or warnings. We have been excluded until now. There has been no support in favour of the fishers of that region. And this happens frequently in our territory, as much as it happens also in other territories of the world, where there are small-scale fishers.

Marga, when you talk about a focus on human rights in marine conservation, what are we talking about for small-scale fishers?

[Marga Machazek from Panama]: When we talk about our rights being violated, it means decisions are made without prior consultation with the citizens. Our rights are violated when we are evicted from our areas. Our rights are violated when our families have to leave our fishing areas. Not only are we evicted but we also lose a physical space, we lose part of our identity, we lose our culture, we lose our future, since they send us to other places where our families are not used to living. They violate our rights when they do not give us free access to the sea. And we lose the right to fishing, which is an ancestral right that guarantees food security, not only of the fishing communities but also of the communities of our people who are not directly involved in fishing. We feel vulnerable every time decisions are made in regard to public spaces like this and no voice of a fisher is heard. Fishers must be present when decisions are made.

Can we say that women fishers in the society are sufficiently supported in their socioeconomic development?

My name is Zoila Bustamante Cardenas. I am from Chile. I am the president of WFF/ULAPA. We are here like a small speck on earth. When we arrived for this event, we were not considered in any way. So for us it is very important that you are here today listening to us because, in this way, we can make visible what the world of artisanal fishing really is like. All of us here are artisanal fishers who represent the world of fishing, not just ourselves. We represent millions of artisanal fishers in this world who also feed you and your communities. Therefore, it is very important that you listen to us, that you know where we come from. There are many countries represented here. We are fighting so that the goals of artisanal fishing are reflected like this message I have on my T-shirt, which is KMGBF Target 23. And today, at 7.15 p.m., if God wills, we will be able to include the concerns of artisanal fishing. So, we want to be heard. We do not want anyone to make decisions in our name. That is why we are here, so that we are recognized as a sector that feeds all the peoples in this world.

We are seeing here a sector of artisanal fishing being organized. German, how does this work?

My name is German Hernandez. I am from Honduras. I represent two million fishers in Honduras. I am also representing fishers worldwide, since we have organized them. We are organizing a voice to be heard at the United Nations, asking them to invite fishers from all over the world so that we can participate, so that no one speaks for us, but we speak for ourselves, because we are the ones who know our sectors and our way of life. And we want to tell the whole world that the fishers are organized and deserve to be part of all events worldwide. Yet we do not know what is going on, and small-scale fishers have been in this situation for a long time.

Eduardo, can you tell us how you do this?

My name is Eduardo Mercado, an Afro-Caribbean fisher from Panama. Today I am representing fishers in Latin America and also the world. We, the artisanal fishers, use ancestral methods of fishing, in which we use the right fishing gear so as not to destroy our marine species. We do not capture species that are in the process of reproduction. We only capture species that we are going to consume and that the people need for food.

[A young SSF activist]: Hello and good morning, everyone. My name is Aaron Chacon. I am a small-scale artisanal fisher from the Central Pacific region of Costa Rica. Precisely because of this, we want to say that here we are looking for inter-generational equity and telling the new generations, yes, there is a future in fishing. And this is where we want to say that it is a great opportunity for us young people, where we can preserve our culture and our territories, not only for us but also for the next generations.

Small-scale fishing has been going on at sea, but what we are defending is a territory of life. And there, in that territory of life, there is the sea, there are the lagoons, there are the rivers. Libia, why don't you tell us more?

[Libia Arcinieges, artisanal fisher, represents the small-scale fishers of Colombia and is from the National Women's Network Confederation]: As fishers, we ask our governments to respect us and give us back our fishing areas and the governance of our waters, so that our ecosystems including rivers, swamps and sea will be sustainable and will continue to provide us with food. The communities of fishers around the world call for action to support small-scale artisanal fishing.


We have with us Chief Lazaro Mecha of Maje Embera Drua in Panama.

[Lazaro Mecha]: In relation to the indigenous peoples of the entire continent, we are committed to discuss the issues of the continental territories, territories that include rivers and lakes, that are part of the food security systems of the world. In all countries, there are lakes and rivers that form part of these territories. Therefore, it is also important to take into account this issue within the framework of COP16. This is very important when more than 500 million people of the world feed off the continental territories.

I am Luis Alberto Perea of the Colombian Pacific, of the Choco Department. We must also thank the organizers of this event and the UN for allowing us to raise our voices in this space. And what we have to say is that humanity and governments must be re-educated in the decision-making processes that have been made so far. Conservation starts from rural territories. Genuine conservation is carried out by the people who are both the users and beneficiaries of their ecosystems and marine species. We contribute in guaranteeing food security. There are important territories that have helped to reach the goals based on the real experience of species management, creating their own dynamics and governance that help to reach the goal of 30x30. And what we want to say is that governments are in debt to all the rural fishers whom we represent here, fishermen and fisherwomen. We have, in most of these territories, contributed towards this goal. And even as we are helping to reach these goals, we do real work. Yet we are not taken into account. We ask to be given the same treatment, the same considerations that we give to the national government. Our territories are the ones that help reach these big goals. Conservation without food security does not exist, not without satisfying the basic needs of the people.

My name is Albert Chan. I come from Mexico, from a Mayan community. I currently work with the ICCA Consortium and we are promoting an initiative in Mesoamerica on coastal marine territories of life. It is important to see that conservation is the result of the use and management of nature that we indigenous peoples and local communities do. In this particular case, we are talking about small-scale fishing as a practice that allows conservation, not as an objective but as a result of the management that indigenous peoples and local communities are engaged in. It must be very clear that in the face of the problems and threats from mega-projects and mega-infrastructure, there is so much evidence to show that the best conservation in these territories revolves around recognizing that management is carried out locally first, and, that conservation cannot be guaranteed through the establishment of more protected areas, as is currently being discussed. What is being sought is not a limitation of access to rights but rather recognition of the free determination and autonomy of indigenous peoples and local communities.

And finally, we must not be afraid to discuss this relationship between indigenous peoples and local communities because we are not talking about just any local community, we are talking about communities that have a strong relationship with their territory and a capacity to govern in their territory. And that as a result of good governance and good relationships, conservation is achieved.

I would like to thank CoopeSolidar, the University of Magdalena and ICSF for being here and for helping us. I just want to say that small-scale fishers is here to stay and from now on we will be present at all events in one way or another. 

Source: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k15/k15icg47f5>