

# The World We Want to Live In

**Empowering coastal indigenous peoples can strengthen artisanal fishers at large through social equity and sustainable development that will result in a wealth of cultures and worldviews**

**A**cross the world's oceans, some 30 mn coastal indigenous peoples interact with marine ecosystems for food, traditions and, just as importantly, for their continued identity as distinct peoples. From the tropics to temperate and polar climates, indigenous communities share this deep reliance on marine living resources, despite the very different ecological contexts that surround them. These communities often also share historical and continuing forms of marginalization, whether social, political, economic, geographic or cultural. This underlying context is similar to that of many (not necessarily indigenous) artisanal or 'small-scale' fisheries around the world. By finding strategies to empower indigenous fishers and communities, therefore, we argue that many solutions may well prove useful for many other fishers around the world.

It is impossible to adequately capture the vast richness of indigenous peoples, and even a single definition of 'indigenous' is inappropriate. The most widely used working characteristics (emerging from an United Nations review in the early 1980s) highlight indigenous communities, peoples and nations, as having a unique ethnic identity and historical continuity prior to colonial societies now existing on their ancestral territories. Acknowledging the many ongoing definitional and legal debates and their wider implications, these communities all share links to marine environments, fish, marine mammals and other living organisms that transcend food consumption. Importantly, the traditional knowledge and oral histories of such peoples, though

clearly including useful information for what we now term 'sustainable management', convey much deeper meanings. These can include practices such as gift exchanges of fish, that are built within the ways in which a distinct group of people recognize their social functions, symbolic structure, and cultural practices. The latter draws from, and contributes to, the symbolisms embedded in fisheries, including food taboos and social construction of seascapes, including the distribution of fishing areas and marine tenure, which again represent much more than resource management.

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Given the essential and often un-substitutable role that oceans play for coastal indigenous peoples, these peoples are acutely exposed to, and aware of, the many challenges faced by today's marine ecosystems. Overfishing by national and international fishing fleets—including both industrial and artisanal operations—are a main driver of resource declines, and may involve destructive illegal fishing practices that impact habitats.

## **Unchecked development**

Before fish abundance decreases outright, the sheer number of competing fishers itself erodes individual catch, available food, and economic profits. Unchecked coastal development, led by growing

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Children and women handlining for fish off Kavieng harbour, Papua New Guinea. Coastal indigenous peoples—artisanal fishers in general—are often conferred ambiguous faculties in the international discourse on ocean and sustainable policies

populations and expanding coastal tourism and industry, can impact important habitats such as mangroves, marshes and reefs, and appropriate coastlines and marine areas that were traditionally used by fishing communities.

These main proximate pressures—overfishing, overcapacity and ocean grabbing—are occurring under the looming spectre of global climate change, which will have drastic impacts on natural systems, and growing economic and social inequity, that threaten to erode democratic systems and increase conflict. Ultimately, climate change will act on marine ecosystems, but social and political instruments must be used to protect the vulnerable sectors of the world's coastal populations, including indigenous peoples. This follows from the fact that in the absence of good governance, protecting and recovering ecosystems may not result in improved human security and well-being.

Coastal indigenous peoples—and, arguably, artisanal fishers in general—are often conferred ambiguous faculties in the international discourse on ocean and sustainable policies, particularly those related to climate change. Intergovernmental reports highlight the fact that politically and economically vulnerable populations will be disproportionately affected

by climate change due to limited access to resources and because of exposure to social and natural hazards, including abject poverty, labour abuses and natural disasters. Yet, they are simultaneously praised as resilient because of their close connections to nature, including potentially holding cultural heritage and knowledge that can help them recognize and adapt to environmental changes. This apparent disconnect is probably due to the way we discuss environmental issues separately from political and social ones.

In the context of fisheries, the recognition of vulnerability and identification of resilience in coastal communities is not contradictory, but is possible because direct dependence on natural resources means that these communities exist at the crux between the two conceptual components of a social-ecological system.

### Climate change

Thus, even while these communities and peoples may be highly ecologically resilient (though this is also under threat due to the projected drastic effects of global climate change), there is much work and support required to overcome continuing challenges from the human dimensions of the system (for example, social, political, economic).

Social or natural stress undermines the ability of self-sustainability, making national and international recognition and protection policies vital for these populations.

There are many strategies and policies to confront such challenges to the security and identity of indigenous and artisanal fishers. Given the scope and scale of shared challenges, some policies must necessarily involve international co-operation. However, much can also be achieved through regional and local initiatives whose successes (and failures) can inform communities facing similar issues.

A first point to remember is that indigenous fisheries (and communities) may be marginalized, but that does not mean they are small. A recent global estimate of seafood consumption by coastal indigenous peoples compiled information for over 1,900 communities and 600 unique groups. Their global annual seafood consumption totalled over 2 mn tonnes, with much higher per capita consumptions than non-indigenous populations (including those living on the same coasts). The mapping of the locations of these communities has enabled ongoing work to connect coastal indigenous peoples around the world through the trans-oceanic migrations of a wide array of species—including sea turtles, whales, fish and birds—that are shared by indigenous communities many thousands of kilometres apart. The findings and messages from such global analyses must be combined with local knowledge and objectives, but their strength lies in empowering local and regional initiatives by raising discussions and awareness of local issues around the world.

Raising recognition of the global nature of indigenous and artisanal fishers, and the challenges they face, can further facilitate the direct exchange of ideas and experiences between communities. Examples of indigenous ‘resurgence’—efforts for the assertion of rights over traditional resources and self-determination—are

increasing around the world. These efforts are somewhat facilitated when there are existing precedents recognizing the legal rights of an indigenous people, but the key factor remains indigenous community-led initiatives that rally around local goals and leaders to achieve specific objectives.

The re-embracing of the value of indigenous knowledge and traditions—including for resource management but also deeper social functions—is central to these initiatives, and this framework of action could be highly useful for non-indigenous but closely knit artisanal fishing communities that face many of the same challenges. Governments can play a highly useful role here by officially and legally recognizing such initiatives, explicitly supporting women and children, and listening to local ideas regarding potential investments in necessary services and alternative livelihoods. As noted above, the wide sharing of these local experiences among communities facing similar issues can help design ever more successful initiatives that avoid or address past pitfalls.

An increasingly important policy framework at international and national scales is the concept of the Blue Economy, which emerged from the UN Rio +20 Conference



Local reef fish on sale at Nukulaofa, Tonga. Examples of indigenous ‘resurgence’—efforts for the assertion of rights over traditional resources and self-determination—are increasing

# A global estimate of seafood consumption by coastal Indigenous peoples

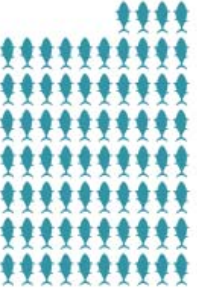
Andrés M. Cisneros-Montemayor, Daniel Pauly, Lauren V. Weatherdon, and Yoshitaka Ota, 2016.

Global average:



19 kg per capita

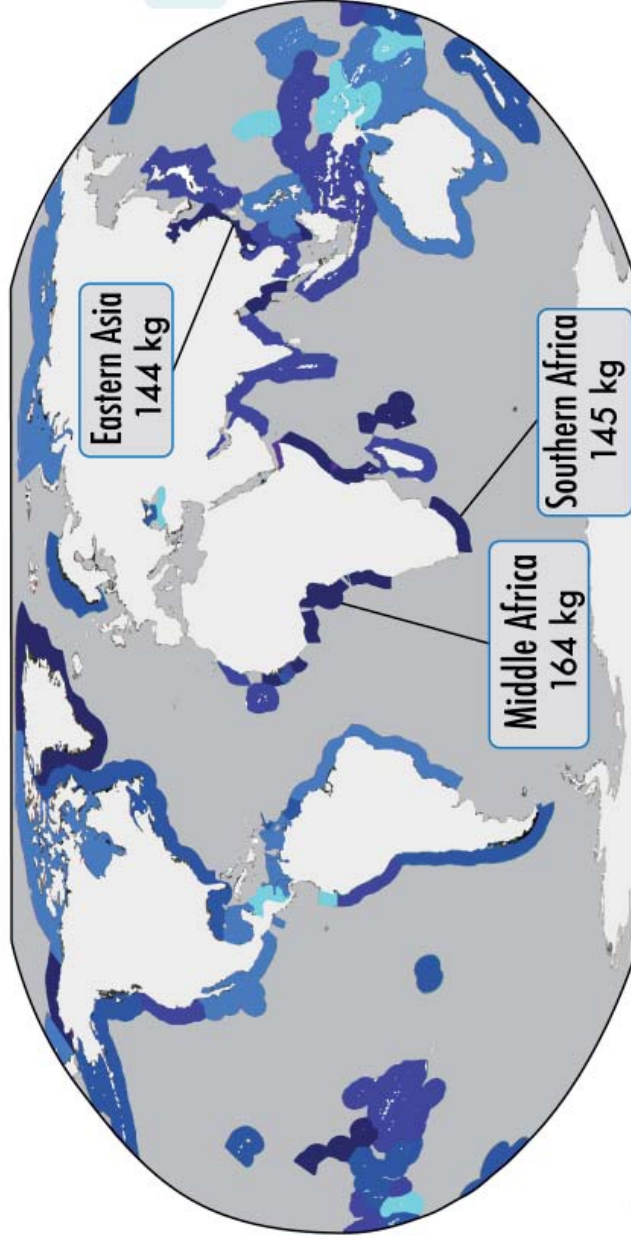
Coastal Indigenous peoples:



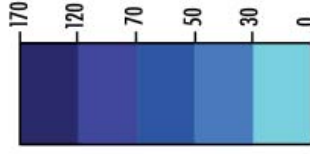
74 kg per capita

Coastal Indigenous Peoples database:

More than **1900** communities identified & **600** ethnic groups.

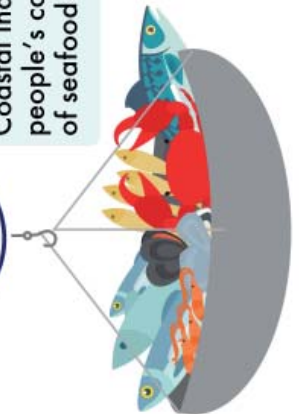


Fish consumption in kg per person per year:

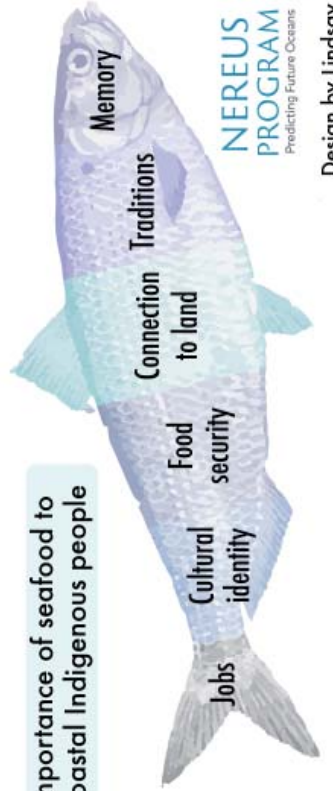


**2.1** million metric tonnes

Coastal Indigenous people's consumption of seafood per year



Importance of seafood to coastal Indigenous people



as the marine counterpart of the Green Economy, aiming to design sustainable development strategies that support and integrate environmental sustainability. Needless to say, this would be highly beneficial to artisanal and indigenous fishing communities. Nevertheless, the Blue Economy discourse itself is symbolic of the dual nature of ‘sustainability’ initiatives. One discussion highlights the need for, and benefits of, environmental sustainability and social equity in existing and future ocean-based industries, particularly noting the necessity of rebuilding strategies for overexploited marine resources, and the importance of empowering traditional fishing communities. The other discussion recognizes these concerns, yet primarily anticipates an inevitable (and desirable) industrialization of every aspect of oceanic resources as a major driver of future economic growth, and thus calls for a proactive push for legal access rights and privatization schemes to promote that this development be done in a sustainable manner. Both arguments have merit, but the key message here is that we must be aware that under these types of policy frameworks, benefits for indigenous peoples and artisanal fishers will not come automatically, and must be actively integrated into conceptual and operational policy designs.

Policy and research such as that highlighted here follow a growing trend that recognizes the global nature of today’s many social and environmental challenges. And while the objectives of such studies and initiatives may be nominally straightforward, the implications of the results for indigenous peoples are much more important than large numbers. For example, in the case of seafood consumption estimates, the significance of seafood for indigenous groups is construed within the social and cultural context in which each group treats their fish. When fish are part of a ceremonial event, consumption does not just support their diet but creates ties between families and individuals. These

relationships are not reflected in a number—useful though it can be for policy—and they cannot be reduced to the simple ways in which we often consider the significance of fish and fisheries, and yet the process of arriving at these types of numbers is a start that can lead to growing global connections and co-operation. Perhaps more than ever, it is vital to recognize and support the work of the many communities and researchers around the world who face and tackle these issues. Even when objectives seem local or unrelated, the sum of this wealth of knowledge can be worth even more than its parts.

Recognizing and addressing the needs of coastal indigenous peoples at a global scale is only a small step towards mainstreaming their issues into wider research and international policies, which would benefit coastal communities at large. As discussed here, these issues include the recognition of the global scale of coastal indigenous peoples and fisheries, and their connections across oceans, the resurgence of indigenous rights and self-determination, and the implications of international policy that can be highly useful if properly leveraged. These and many similar themes represent a break with the way we traditionally managed resources and considered our relationship to nature. An instructive way to think about this is by contrasting ‘food security’, that is, the ability to access adequate nutrition, with ‘food sovereignty’, which also means having a choice over what you eat. Policies and research for the sustainability of indigenous and artisanal fishers, in addition to considering how we will adapt to survive the challenges ahead, should also consider what kind of world we want to live in. Social equity is the key to start, but to achieve true sustainable development we must think beyond fisheries and resource management to create a space where a wealth of cultures and worldviews can thrive. 🍴

**For more**

[rio20.un.org/](http://rio20.un.org/)
**UN Rio +20 Conference**
[researchgate.net/  
publication/311449769\\_A\\_Global\\_  
Estimate\\_of\\_Seafood\\_Consumption\\_by\\_  
Coastal\\_Indigenous\\_Peoples](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311449769_A_Global_Estimate_of_Seafood_Consumption_by_Coastal_Indigenous_Peoples)
**A Global Estimate of Seafood  
Consumption by Coastal  
Indigenous Peoples**