



## The unintended consequences of ‘responsible fishing’ for small-scale fisheries: Lessons from the Pacific coast of Colombia

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### ABSTRACT

The ‘Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries’ developed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation has been central for the governance of fisheries. Most responsible fisheries initiatives are market-driven and motivate transitions towards greener economies. These added-value fish economies have increasingly connected fishing grounds to external markets that demand high quality sustainable products. This article problematizes the framework of responsible fishing and examines its intersections with place-based institutional processes in the Pacific coast of Colombia. In doing this, it explores how the concept of ‘responsible fishing’ has been framed, arguing that it has been used to operationalize the expansion of neoliberal processes in the oceans. It draws on small-scale fisheries performed by Afro-descendant people in the Gulf of Tribugá, where responsible fishing narratives have been linked to the creation of marine protected areas and responsible fish supply chains. Two dominant framings of responsible fishing were identified; a ‘sustainability’ framing that denotes the sustainable use of fishing resources, and a ‘technical’ framing that refers to the use of environmentally safe practices. However, none of these framings accounts for social responsibility. Instead they have enforced the division of fishing practices between ‘responsible’/‘irresponsible’, and produced static, ahistorical and oversimplified understandings of fishing dynamics. All this has triggered a local need for external control over fisheries governance, disempowering place-based control mechanisms. This article concludes by questioning whether responsible fishing can successfully ensure a sustainable use of fishing resources, or if moving beyond ‘responsibility’ is needed to strengthen local institutional processes and autonomy among coastal peoples.

### 1. Introduction

Fisheries around the globe experienced accelerated industrialisation processes between the 1940s and the 1990s [60]. Governments played a key role in facilitating these processes through the introduction of fuel and capacity-enhancing subsidies, as well as funding the development of more effective fishing gear [61]. This has boosted fisheries overcapacity and overfishing, dramatically impacting marine ecosystems, in some cases triggering the collapse of entire industries (e.g. Peruvian Anchoveta and Atlantic cod) [26,43]. To counteract the impacts of industrial fisheries, top-down state control mechanisms started to be implemented around the globe using a precautionary approach to fisheries governance [16,2,29].<sup>1</sup> However, small-scale fishers and coastal dwellers have generally been excluded from national fisheries governance decision-making arenas [12,5]. ‘Responsible fishing’ emerged during the 1990s as a global institutional framework to ensure a sustainable use of fisheries, notably after the Food and Agriculture

Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) released the ‘Code of conduct for responsible fisheries’ (referred here as ‘the Code’) in 1995. This voluntary instrument is still in force, as an international guideline for the development of fishing policies and management. Although the Code provides an innovative framework that integrates fisheries management, conservation, exploitation, production, and consumption within the framework of responsible fishing, compliance around the world has been poor [53].

Questions regarding the responsible fishing framework include, responsible for whom? Who and how are responsible practices defined? Do responsible practices encompass the sustainability of aquatic resources? Does it include social responsibility? This article examines these questions and opens debate on the impacts of the ways responsible fishing narratives have been framed in the governance of small-scale fisheries. In doing this, it examines the framings of responsible fishing and their influence over place-based institutional processes in the Gulf of Tribugá on the Pacific coast of Colombia.<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Governance defined as “the whole of public as well as private interactions taken to solve societal problems and create societal opportunities. It includes the formulation and application of principles guiding those interactions and cares for institutions that enable them” ([30], 17).

<sup>2</sup> Institutions conceived as the “regularised patterns of behaviour between individuals and groups in society” ([32], 225).

analysis critically engages the concept of ‘responsible fishing’ as a framing of a desired state, showing how it involves multiple and conflicting understandings of responsibility, concealing tension between top-down market-based control mechanisms and place-based institutional processes. Entman [13] defined framings as a feature of discourse that selects “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (1993, 52). To understand problems, identify causes, evaluate, and create possible solutions framings involve a simplification of reality that influences peoples’ ideas, behaviours, and communication [3]. Framings can be identified through the comparison of narratives, examining how particular meanings and understandings become more prominent than others [14]. It is important to position framings within their cultural context to analyse how they emerge and have been operationalized to influence institutional processes [19,6]. Moreover, Leach [31] and Dressler et al. [11] argued that the framings produced by environmental governance policies can often create static understandings of nature that support the political and economic agendas of the state and commercial actors.

In exploring the interactions between responsible fishing and place-based institutional processes, this article draws on the work of Cleaver who demonstrated that “people consciously and unconsciously draw on existing social and cultural arrangements to shape institutions in response to changing situations. The resulting institutions are a mix of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’, ‘formal and ‘informal’” ([7], 26). Where people actively use discursive symbols produced by the state, tradition, international agencies, and socio-natural processes to legitimise their institutional arrangements [10,37,7,8]. Thus, institutions are multi-purpose, complex, dynamic, and leak meaning from one context to another [9]. This article examines historical socio-natural processes that have shaped fishing practices and institutional processes, analysing them in relation to the power/knowledge dynamics in which they operate [33,51]. In referring to the concept of socio-nature this analysis recognises the inseparability between nature and society [62]. It builds on Foucault’s [23] understanding of power/knowledge dynamics as disciplinary forces that emerge when accepted forms of knowledge are conceived as ‘truth’, and are used to control the conduct of others. These dynamics participate in the establishment of governmentalities defined as “the art of exercising power in the form and according to the model of the economy” ([22], 92), which are not only performed by the state, but by individuals and groups [34]. It is important to note that ‘political economy’ has been the main form of knowledge – the dominant regime of truth that has informed the configuration of Western governmentalities since the 18th century. All of which has turned the market into “a site of verification-falsification for governmental practice” ([21], 32). Thus, the expansion of political economy has involved the institution of governmentalities that control peoples’ understandings and use of natural resources ([21], 15–16).

Two dominant framings of responsible fishing were identified in the Gulf of Tribugá; first, a ‘sustainability’ framing, which defines responsible fishing as the sustainable use of fishing resources, with a major focus on the maintenance of fish abundance; and second, a ‘technical’ framing that conceives responsible fishing as the use of environmentally safe fishing practices, referring to those practices that minimise impacts over fish stocks and marine ecosystems. Responsible fishing has contributed to the neoliberalisation of the ocean along the Pacific coast of Colombia.<sup>3</sup> Mansfield [38,39] demonstrated that marine enclosures and property rights for fisheries governance have enabled the expansion of neoliberal imperatives in the oceans,

operating hand-in-hand with market incentives. This article adds to the understanding of neoliberalisation processes by showing how market incentives in the Gulf of Tribugá have thrived from responsible fishing narratives promoted by conservation Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) through biodiversity conservation projects, the creation of a Marine Protected Area (MPA), and the development of responsible fish supply chains. Overall, responsible fishing has involved a moralistic governance regime that has granted conservation NGOs and restaurants participating in responsible fish supply chains along the northern Pacific coast, the authority to govern small-scale fisheries under very limited government involvement. To build this argument, this article starts by exploring the fluid dynamics of fishing practices on the Gulf of Tribugá. Then, it examines the discursive framing of responsible fishing, showing how its boundaries are actively defined. Next, it discusses how responsible fishing has influenced social interactions and place-based institutional processes. Lastly, it argues that responsible fishing narratives have oversimplified fishing dynamics, unintentionally producing fixed imaginaries of fishing practices, and disempowering place-based social control mechanisms through the enforcement of a local need for external control mechanisms.

## 2. Methods

A multi-methods approach was used, drawing on ethnographic research and secondary data collection in Bogotá and nine coastal villages in the Gulf of Tribugá (Jurubirá, Tribugá, Nuquí, Panguí, Coquí, Joví, Termale, Partadó, and Arusí) between July 2014 and March 2015 (Fig. 1). In total, 94 semi-structured interviews were performed with community members and leaders, fisher people, fish traders, fisheries and environmental sectors officers, NGO officials, restaurant employees, and funding agents. The interviews explored fishing dynamics, fish value chains, local perceptions on responsible fishing, major threats to small-scale fisheries, place-based institutional arrangements, and fisheries governance. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded, transcribed, and coded by emerging themes. Respondent’s names were replaced by pseudonyms. The analysis also included information from informal conversations, participant observation, meetings, reports, and historical archives. All quotes were translated by the author to English and the original Spanish quotes are available in [Supplementary material](#).

## 3. Fluid practices

The Gulf of Tribugá is located on the northern Pacific coast of Colombia (Fig. 1). It is predominantly inhabited by the descendants of African people who were forcibly brought to Colombia by the Spanish colony (16th and 17th centuries), and enslaved primarily to perform alluvial gold mining [44]. These people have survived a long history of dispossession and racial discrimination in Colombia that continues today [47,65]. The northern section of the Gulf was declared as a protected area – the *Ensenada de Utría* National Natural Park (PNNU) in 1987, causing the eviction of Afro-descendant families living within the park. South from the PNNU the coastal area was titled to nine Afro-descendant communities, as *Los Riscuales* collective territory in 2002.<sup>4</sup> Further inland there are three indigenous *resguardos* (reserves) titled to the *Emberá* people.

Socio-natural interactions on the Pacific coast have been shaped by the pulsing dynamics of complex riverine systems that flow from the West Andean mountain range towards the Pacific Ocean [36,46]. Waterscapes along the coast change in response to semidiurnal tidal patterns – with a transition from high to low tides two times a day, and

<sup>3</sup> Neoliberalism understood as a non-monolithic “political economic approach that posits markets as the ultimate tool for achieving optimal use and allocation of scarce resources” ([38], 65).

<sup>4</sup> Law 70 (1993) granted collective territorial rights to Afro-descendant communities along the Pacific after the 1991 Colombian Political Constitution recognised Colombia as a pluriethnic and multicultural country.

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