



## LATIN AMERICA'S ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

This series explores the international dimensions of Latin America's environmental challenges and the role of environmental issues in shaping the region's most important diplomatic and economic relationships.

November 2021

# Artisanal Squid Fishing in Peru Threatened by International Fleets

By Leslie Moreno Custodio

*Illegal vessels threaten the livelihoods of artisanal fishermen in the north of the country. But they are not the only challenge fishermen face as the sector seeks formalization.*

It is almost midday in the northern Peruvian port city of Paita, near Ecuador. Although it is warm all year round, the winter is long and it's windy enough to rock El Profeta de Dios, an artisanal squid fishing vessel about to embark.

Pedro Díaz and five other fishermen have spent three days stocking the boat with food, ice for the hold, and the necessary tools to catch Humboldt squid (*Dosidicus gigas*), or pota, as they call it, in the Pacific waters. They only know the time of departure; the return is always uncertain. It can take between a week and a fortnight to complete the trip and return to the coast.

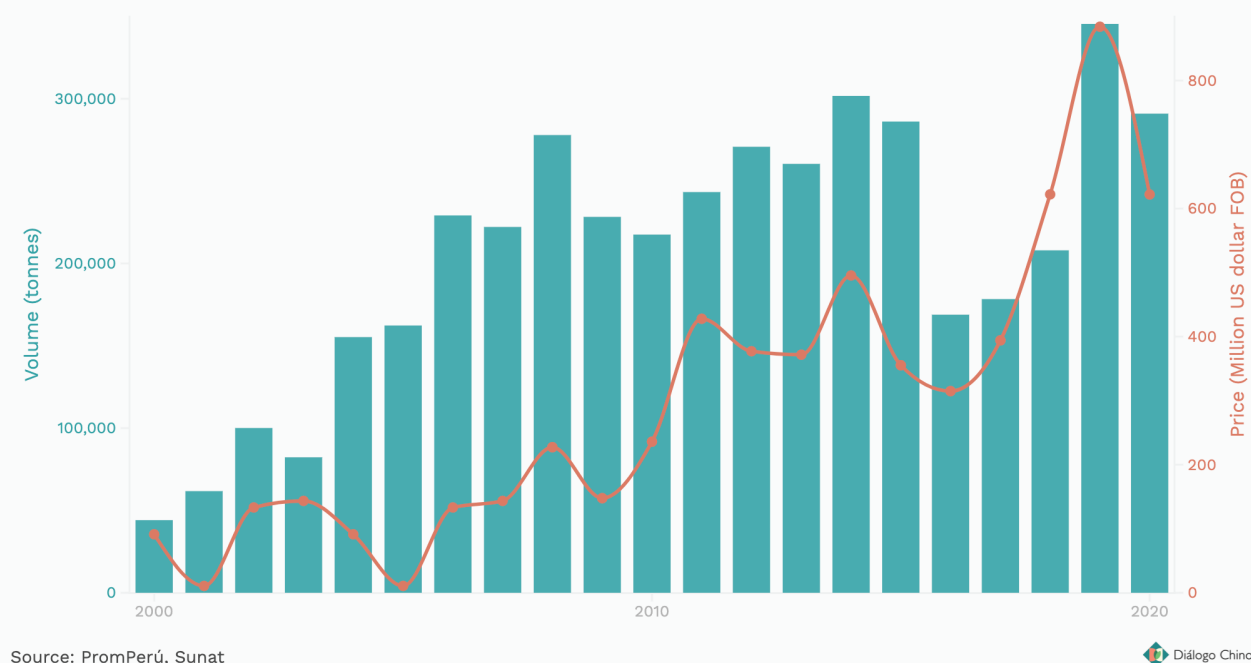
Fishing for pota, a fast-growing mollusk, has become the second biggest fishing activity in Peru in terms of catch volume and contribution to export revenues. In 2020 alone, Peru exported more than 297,000 metric tons, worth US \$610 million. For years, the country has accounted for about half of the world's landings of squid, according to FAO data.<sup>1</sup>

Paita lands Peru's largest volume of Humboldt squid by tonnage. In the last five years, it has landed on average 250,000 metric tons annually. And that figure is increasing. Fishing is concentrated here because of the favorable environmental conditions

Photo credit: Artisanal fishing boats in Paita, Peru: CLJ Giordano, Shutterstock, July 2019

## Peruvian exports of Humboldt squid (pota)

Comparison of volume of exports (in tonnes) with their value (in million US dollars Free on Board) between 2000 and 2020



(temperature, salinity, depth, oxygenation) for pota during part of the year.

The abundance of squid also attracts foreign vessels. In August and September 2020, Chinese-flagged vessels hovered around the borders of Peru and Ecuador's Exclusive Economic Zones, prompting an international outcry over alleged overfishing. Some months earlier, in June, the Bureau of Fisheries within China's Ministry of Agriculture introduced a seasonal pota fishing ban for the period of September through November in the area to the west of Ecuador's Galápagos Islands.

For artisanal fishers in northern Peru, unregulated fishing by national vessels is also a major problem. Coupled with the informality of the sector, which causes price variations and hampers conservation efforts, it means many no longer want to bank on making a living from the sea.

## THE SQUID BOOM IN PERU

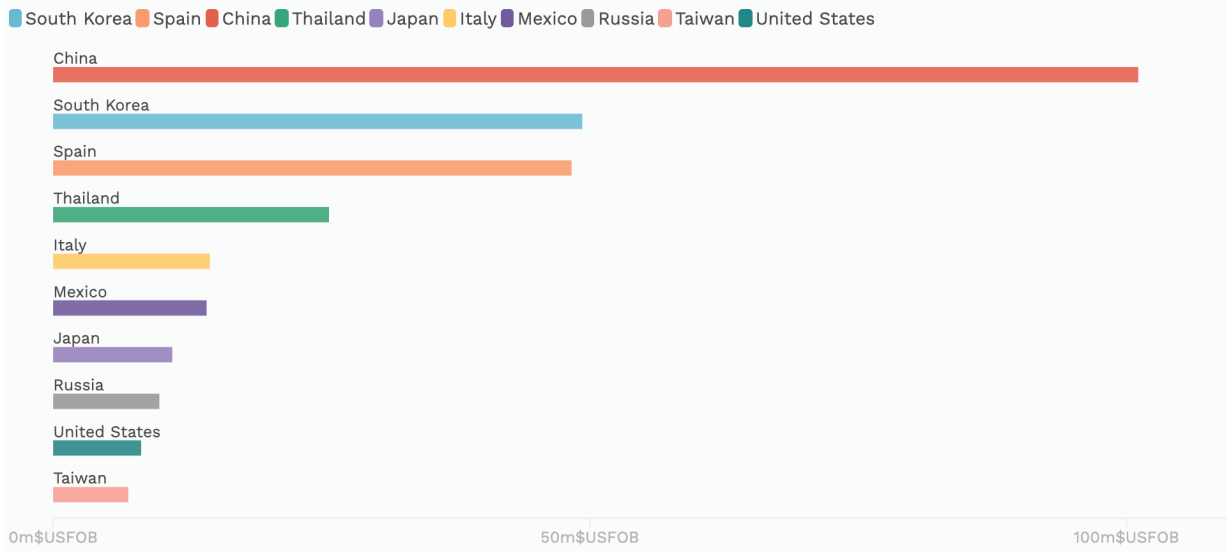
Díaz has been a fisherman for more than 20 years and is also a member of the Paita Humboldt Squid Association. He used to fish hake and horse mackerel, but with the decline of these resources and the increase of squid, he saw an opportunity.

In Peru, the first official records of pota catches date back to 1964, but it was not until the 1990s that commercial fishing began. Over the years, a number of control and protection measures have been introduced, including the current Reglamento de Ordenamiento Pesquero for squid.<sup>2</sup>

**“The latest report by government agency Instituto del Mar del Peru highlights the collapse of what a mere decade ago was a flourishing squid population.”**

## Top 10 squid export destinations

Exports of Humboldt squid in 2021 in million dollars Free on Board



Source: Sunat

Diálogo Chino

This regulation requires annual surveys to establish a harvest quota, set this year at 580,000 metric tons.

The latest report by government agency Instituto del Mar del Peru highlights the collapse of what a mere decade ago was a flourishing squid population.<sup>3</sup> Current government regulations still have not established closed or limited fishing seasons, nor is there a minimum catch size for squid. However, the study recommends that fishing levels in 2021 should not exceed 580,000 metric tons nationwide.

**“Being an artisanal fisherman is very hard work. There is no reward.”**

Díaz says that his knowledge is the result of years of experience and information-sharing among fishermen. He says that the artisanal sector needs specific regulations: “We don’t want to just fish and catch. We want to allow [the pota] to spawn and develop so that it generates employment and development for the state. We also want the pota to have a sustainable season. And what will those who come after

us, the young people who are dedicated to fishing, find?”

Because Peru has no season closed to fishing and no minimum catch size for squid, Díaz is uneasy about what he sees as punitive regulations. “They control us to punish us, not to teach us how to conserve [the species],” he says. In a good season, Díaz can earn \$0.20 for every kilo of squid he catches, around half the price of a small bottle of Coca-Cola.

Braulio Miranda, a fishing boat owner, says: “They [the government] demand a lot of documents from us. It’s good that there is regulation, but it’s very expensive for us. Sometimes there are fish and we catch them, sometimes we don’t, and the costs are too high. I ask the government to support artisanal fishermen. Everything has gone up, fuel, food in general, but the price of squid is not going up.”

## FORMALIZATION REMAINS A DISTANT GOAL

Segundo Meza is 50 years old and does not want his children to follow in his footsteps, as he did his father's. "Being an artisanal fisherman is very hard work. There is no reward," he says. Yet, despite his wishes, Meza's eldest son, Alex, 21, will join him on his next fishing expedition.

Like Meza, who is a member of the Paita Port Union of Humboldt Squid and Deep Water Fishers (Sindicato de Pescadores de Calamar y Aguas Profundas del Puerto de Paita), generations of local families have maintained their ties to the sea. When he is not at sea, he manages the procedures for other fishermen who are in the process of formalizing their permit to extract marine resources. "The fisherman is the one who goes out to sea to work, and he is the one who benefits the least," says Meza.

Many Paita fishermen say they are yet to see the benefits of a process of formalization that began almost five years ago.

The Peruvian Ministry of Production's (Produce) formalization process involves two means of registration. One covers individual vessels (SIFORPA II), the other enables fishers to register through cooperatives. Despite repeated extensions of deadlines for registering all vessels, only 54 percent of individual vessels obtained their registration, and for those registered through cooperatives the figure is a lowly 11.2 percent.

**"The fisherman is the one who goes out to sea to work, and he is the one who benefits the least."**

"In these five months [from April to August] the number of permits granted has doubled, compared to the five years of the formalization process for fishing cooperatives," says Percy Grandez, a lawyer

with the Marine Governance Program of the Peruvian Society for Environmental Law, an organization that works with Produce on the implementation of the registration process.<sup>4</sup>

If vessels do not formalize their status, they will not only be banned from fishing but also considered illegal in the country and in international waters. According to Grandez, "being an illegal fisher not only implies administrative responsibility and being subject to sanctions, fines, or seizures, but it can also imply criminal responsibility."

## VESSELS IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS

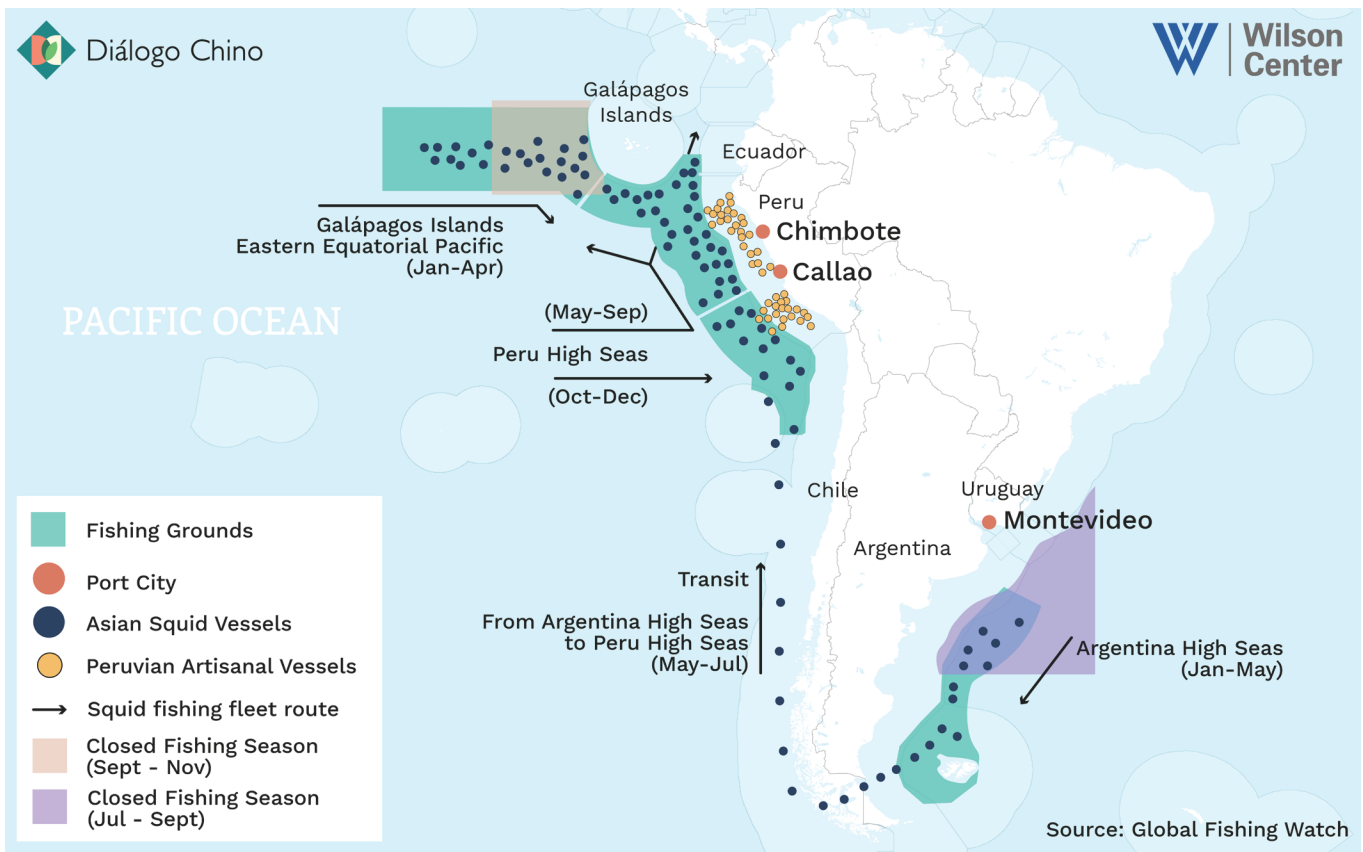
"When we report [the presence of foreign vessels] they tell us to bring us evidence. If we approach them, they withdraw. When the patrols arrive, there are no more boats. We don't know if these fleets are legal or illegal," says Díaz.

Measures to control foreign vessels are slowly being implemented in Peru, but other steps are also being taken, promoted by the international community.

The South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO) was created in 2009 to regulate fishing in the region's international waters. Among its most important measures is the authorization of vessels to fish, as well as the implementation of a compatible satellite monitoring system and the presence of observers on board to monitor informality.

According to the latest report by the SPRFMO's Humboldt Squid Scientific Committee, there has been a steady increase in the Chinese fleet over the past decade.<sup>5</sup> In 2010 there were 104 Chinese vessels; in 2019 there were 503.





And according to the satellite tracking platform Global Fishing Watch (GFW), a total of 615 vessels—584 of them Chinese—fished for squid in this area of the Pacific in 2020.<sup>6</sup>

**“For the first time, China’s fishing regulations refer to 'sustainable development' and better control of its fleet size.”**

The GFW survey revealed the presence of unidentified vessels in the international waters between Tumbes and Piura. These were detected with radar designed for vessels that do not employ the conventional identification system or those that have chosen to transmit their location intermittently.

In early 2020, China revised its Distant-Water Fisheries Management Regulations, introducing a blacklist for ship captains engaged in illegal, unregulated,

or unreported fishing activities, along with stricter reporting requirements, onboard observers for transshipment vessels, and a legal obligation to report hourly transponder recordings. Despite these regulations, an earlier GFW analysis found that some Chinese vessels had turned off their satellite systems at the edge of Peruvian maritime borders.<sup>7</sup>

For the first time, China’s fishing regulations refer to “sustainable development” and better control of its fleet size. The fisheries division of the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture followed these regulatory revisions with its June 2020 ban, which forbids fishing by Chinese vessels from September through November in the area to the west of Ecuador’s Galápagos Islands. The seasonal ban was reintroduced in September 2021, applicable to the same location. It remains to be seen what impact the ban will have.

“[At the SPRFMO meetings] Peru has not only failed to present substantiated complaints about cases of





Photo credit: Dock workers inspect the incoming squid for sale in Arequipa, Peru: Milton Rodriguez, Shutterstock, February 2017

behavior evidencing illegal fishing but has also failed to present proposals on sustainable management. This shows that they are not paying due attention to this resource,” says a fisheries specialist who has participated in several sectoral roundtables and prefers not to be identified.

In a recent communiqué, the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism stated that “at present, Peru and China’s technical teams are working, through virtual means, on optimizing the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries. Bilateral relations with China are extremely important.”<sup>8</sup> The renegotiation of the FTA could provide an opportunity to establish stricter guidelines on the presence of the foreign fleet in Peru’s national waters, as well as environmental measures for the conservation of the species.

Juan Carlos Sueiro, fisheries director at the non-governmental organization Oceana, says that Peru should try to reduce foreign fishing in its national maritime territory. He adds that competition for squid could have an impact on the availability of the resource.

He also highlights the changes Peru has adopted in its own jurisdiction. In August 2020, it introduced a rule requiring foreign pota fishing vessels to use a Peruvian satellite tracking system if they want to use its ports. “What we have seen is that there has been a very big reduction in the number of Chinese vessels entering Peru,” he says.

From January to June, the National Port Authority registered only two Chinese vessels. Industry experts also say that China’s absence from international waters in the Pacific could also be an effect of last year’s media outcry involving its fleet, as well as China’s own tougher rules on illegal fishing.

In Paita, fishermen are still unsure of the effectiveness of China’s seasonal ban and how it will affect them. Their main concern is the precariousness of their income and the risk of not being able to fish, as they are faced with what they see as unfair competition in their waters. “They will say: ‘We won’t go for a few months,’ but when you least expect it, they are just around the corner,” says Meza.

**Leslie Moreno Custodio** is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Lima, Peru. She covers social issues focused on the environment, human rights, and indigenous communities. Her work explores issues from an ethnographic and documentary perspective. Moreno studied journalism at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, where she is currently pursuing a master's degree in visual anthropology. She worked as an investigative journalist and photographer for Peruvian media outlets IDL-Reporteros and Ojo Público. Moreno was also a member of one of the finalist teams for the 2019 United Nations SDG Action Awards in the "Storyteller" category. She currently collaborates with national and international media outlets such as El País, Diálogo Chino, and others.





## NOTES

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One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
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