

Small-scale fishing in the face of big oil and massive storms: One Peruvian coastal community's call for Blue Justice



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A remote fishing village on the northern coast of Peru, Lobitos has undergone dramatic transformations over the last 120 years, shaped by oil extraction, foreign capital, military occupation, and tourism development. Despite its long-standing artisanal fishing heritage, Lobitos' small-scale fishers have historically been marginalized in economic and governance structures, enduring environmental degradation, restricted access to resources, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

The first known inhabitants of the Lobitos region were the Tallán people, an Indigenous group that thrived along the coastal plains of Piura. The Tallán economy was based on fishing, agriculture, and trade. By the late 15th century, the Inca Empire had incorporated the Tallán, but their influence was short-lived due to Spanish colonization in 1532. Early artisanal fishers traveling along the Peruvian coastline named the location "Lobitos" due to the large number of sea lions ("lobos marinos") resting on the beaches. Lobitos was formally founded for the petroleum industry in the late 19th century, when the Scottish firm Balfour Williamson & Company established the Peruvian Petroleum Syndicate in 1901. Oil companies built housing, schools, hospitals, desalination plants, a stadium, a market, and a railway to support foreign workers. They also maintained a rigid class hierarchy. During this period, small-scale fishers coexisted with the petroleum workforce but were largely marginalized in historical records, treated as a "floating population" rather than key actors in Lobitos' history.

Photo: Local youth find crabs smothering in oil the morning after the devastating spill. Lobitos, Peru. 2024.
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Location:

Lobitos, Talara, Piura, Peru

Ecosystem type:

Marine

Main gear:

Cast net, gleaning, harpoon, hook and line

Target species:

Bonito, Liza, Mero, Pez diablo

Vessel type:

5-7m (bote de madera con vela / wooden sailboat) & 1.5-3m ("zapatitos," "small shoe" wooden boat)

Number of fishers:

150 fishermen & 170 women involved along the value chain

% of full-time fishers:

50%



However, modern challenges have weakened the social fabric of the fishing community. Younger generations are increasingly leaving due to the economic instability of small-scale fisheries, a trend exacerbated by pollution, declining fish stocks, and industrial encroachment.



In 1968, a military coup led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado nationalized all oilfields within six days, expelling foreign operators and creating Petroperú, the state-run petroleum company that continues to operate today. Recognizing Lobitos' strategic location near the Talara Air Base, the Peruvian military moved 7,000 soldiers into the town, repurposing the existing oil infrastructure for military operations. During this 30-year military occupation, small-scale fishers faced extreme restrictions. The military saw fisherfolk as an obstacle to national security, treating them as subordinate to state interests. Throughout this period, Lobitos' original residents were pushed further into economic and social marginalization.

Following the Peru-Ecuador Peace Agreement (1999), which mandated a reduction in military presence, the Lobitos military base was decommissioned. However, the military stripped the town of valuable infrastructure, dismantling and selling government buildings, cinemas, casinos, pipelines, homes, and public services. With the military's exit, surfers began moving into the area. This economic shift brought new commercial opportunities, but also territorial conflicts between fishing families and tourism investors who sought to privatize land along the coast.

Despite decades of external control, Lobitos' fishing identity has remained strong. Artisanal fishing is more than an economic activity—it is a deeply rooted cultural practice passed down through generations. Fishers maintain traditional techniques such as handlines, gillnets, and small wooden boats (balsas), often without refrigeration, limiting the distance they can travel to fish. The cuevas de Las Capullanas, ancient sea caves considered a cultural heritage site, have long been central to local identity, with stories and legends tied to them.

Small-scale fishers in Lobitos have historically been excluded from decision-making processes regarding marine resource management and territorial governance. The General Fisheries Law (Decreto Ley N° 25977) defines small-scale (artisanal) fishing as the use of boats up to 15 meters in length within five nautical miles of the coast, an area legally reserved for artisanal fishers. However, enforcement remains weak, and industrial fleets frequently encroach upon these waters, reducing local fishers' catches.

Efforts to self-organize have emerged over the decades, including the formation of the José Olaya Fishing Cooperative in the 1970s and the local fishers' guild, which has fought for territorial rights, fairer prices, and protections against industrial overreach. However, limited political influence and systemic neglect have continued to hinder their ability to secure long-term sustainability.

Justice in context

Types of justice:

- Distributive
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- **Market**
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- **Environmental**
- **COVID-19 related**
- Other

Challenges to equity

The fishing community in Lobitos has long faced structural injustices and systemic exclusion, shaped by colonial history, industrial exploitation, and government neglect. Over time, oil extraction, military occupation, and tourism-driven development have reshaped the town's economy, land use, and access to resources, prioritizing external interests over local livelihoods. Today, Lobitos' fishers struggle with environmental degradation, land privatization, lack of basic services, and weak legal protections, all of which threaten their way of life, cultural heritage, and long-term sustainability.

Historical exclusion and economic displacement

For over a century, Lobitos has been developed primarily to serve foreign and industrial interests, leaving small-scale fishers economically invisible and politically marginalized. Under British oil companies (1901–1962), fishers were allowed to work but were excluded from housing, healthcare, and education benefits available to oil workers. In 1962, the Peruvian military took control of Lobitos, restricting access to fishing grounds, imposing arbitrary taxes, and confiscating boats and gear, reinforcing the systematic exclusion of fishers. Following the military withdrawal in the 1990s, tourism development took precedence, leading to land disputes, rising costs of living, and restricted coastal access. Now, the Costanera I Highway, a 75-kilometer tourism-focused infrastructure project, is reshaping the coastal landscape, presenting both opportunities and risks for fishing communities.

The Costanera I Highway: Development vs. displacement

The Costanera I Highway, initiated in September 2024, is designed to connect 20 beaches in the Talara district, including Lobitos, with the goal of boosting tourism and economic growth. However, concerns remain about its social and environmental consequences:

- Land privatization and real estate speculation threaten to displace fishing families as land prices rise.
- Increased tourism could shift government priorities away from fisheries toward commercial and hospitality industries.
- Environmental risks are heightened, as the highway is being built in a ravine prone to groundwater flooding, which historically turns into a river during El Niño, potentially cutting Lobitos off from Talara, the nearest hospital, grocery store, and transport hub.

Basic services crisis: Water scarcity, sanitation, and waste management

Since El Niño 2022, Lobitos has suffered from severe water shortages, forcing residents to buy water from private suppliers. The state-mandated water truck, meant to provide essential water access, arrives sporadically, leaving many without a reliable source of clean water.

Basic services crisis [continued]

Sanitation remains another critical issue. Lobitos relies on an open sewer system, creating serious public health risks and degrading the marine and terrestrial environment. Meanwhile, waste disposal remains unregulated, with plastic pollution accumulating in dry forests. Despite millions of dollars invested in tourism infrastructure, such as the Costanera Highway, there has been no corresponding investment in essential services for longtime fishing residents, reinforcing the pattern of systematic exclusion that small-scale fishing communities continue to face.

The 2024 Petroperú oil spill: A crisis for small-scale fishers

On December 20, 2024, Petroperú's pre-shipping operations at the Talara Refinery resulted in a massive oil spill, contaminating 471,400 square meters of seawater and 47 kilometers of coastline. This disaster severely impacted:

- Vital small-scale fishing areas, disrupting marine ecosystems.
- Cultural heritage sites, including Las Capullanas sea caves.
- The Mar Tropical de Grau National Reserve, a protected marine ecosystem.

Over 2,000 small-scale fishers lost their ability to work, while local tourism, another economic lifeline, suffered massive declines. Adding to the injustice, Petroperú hired local fishers – including young people – to clean the spill for just \$20 USD per day, without providing proper safety equipment or training. Two weeks later, Petroperú abruptly ended cleanup efforts, leaving fishers exposed to toxic conditions and long-term contamination unresolved.

Meanwhile, fishers were excluded from remediation decisions, continuing a pattern of exclusion and inequity in environmental governance and corporate accountability. While Petroperú continues to profit from oil extraction, Lobitos remains without reliable access to clean water, functioning sanitation, or economic support for affected families.

Government response: Environmental emergency declaration and ongoing actions

On December 27, 2024, the Ministry of the Environment of Peru (MINAM) issued Ministerial Resolution No. 00443-2024-MINAM, officially declaring a 90-business-day environmental emergency in response to the December 20 oil spill caused by Petroperú S.A. The resolution covered the most impacted areas, including Talara, Lobitos, and El Alto, affecting 47.14 hectares of intertidal zone (shoreline areas) and 228.74 hectares of subtidal zone (underwater areas) (MINAM, 2025).

In response to the widespread ecological and economic damage, multiple government agencies were mandated to conduct assessments, oversee remediation efforts, and enforce environmental regulations.

Government response [continued]

These institutions included:

- OEFA (Environmental Evaluation and Oversight Agency) – Responsible for monitoring environmental compliance and imposing sanctions.
- SANIPES (National Fisheries Health Agency) – Tasked with analyzing seafood safety and potential hydrocarbon contamination.
- ANA (National Water Authority) – Conducting water quality assessments to determine the spill's impact on local marine ecosystems.
- MINEM (Ministry of Energy and Mines) – Overseeing oil industry regulations and ensuring corporate accountability.

These agencies, along with Petroperú S.A., were required to report their activities weekly in 'multisectoral meetings,' which are currently being held virtually. However, community leaders and fishers have expressed frustration over the lack of transparency and slow response times from both the government and Petroperú.

Environmental violations and sanctions against Petroperú

According to Official Letter 07-2025/GRP-450000 issued by the Regional Government of Piura, OEFA confirmed that hydrocarbon levels in water and sediment samples exceed environmental quality standards. As a result, six administrative measures were imposed on Petroperú, including:

1. Identification and control of the spill source – Petroperú failed to provide a clear technical justification for the cause of the spill, leading to a fine of 36 UIT (\$52,061.26 USD).
2. Immediate containment and remediation measures – Petroperú was ordered to accelerate cleanup operations and prevent further spread of hydrocarbons into marine ecosystems.
3. Ensure the complete recovery of the spilled hydrocarbons – OEFA determined that a significant portion of the oil remained in the water and along the coastline, causing ongoing environmental and economic harm to fishers.
4. Implement ecosystem restoration efforts – Petroperú was required to work with independent specialists to develop a long-term recovery plan for marine biodiversity and local fisheries.
5. Provide an updated risk assessment – The company was mandated to disclose accurate data on hydrocarbon levels and their potential health risks to the population.
6. Increase monitoring and reporting frequency – Petroperú was instructed to submit updated environmental impact reports every two weeks for the duration of the emergency period.

Despite these measures, fishers and community members argue that enforcement has been weak, as Petroperú has yet to comply with its obligations fully.

Justice in context



Fishers fear that prolonged exposure to hydrocarbons may result in:

- Long-term damage to marine biodiversity, reducing fish stocks.
- Toxic contamination of seafood, affecting both public health and local economies.
- Market instability, as consumers may avoid buying fish and seafood from the affected region, worsening the financial crisis for fishing families.

Without immediate scientific testing and transparent reporting, the spill's economic and ecological consequences will continue to unfold, further straining small-scale fishers.



Discrepancy in spill volume and community oversight

One of the biggest concerns remains: How much oil was actually spilled? According to Petroperú's official report (GOTL-0539-2025), using a mathematical equation, the company estimates that only 9.05 barrels of oil were released into the ocean. As of now, they claim to have recovered 4.96 barrels. However, OEFA has not independently verified these figures, and community members dispute them, citing visible contamination along the coast and continued hydrocarbon presence in sediment samples. Initially, OEFA's environmental inspections were conducted without community representatives, preventing local oversight. After sustained pressure from fishers, OEFA's Evaluation Unit allowed local observers to accompany sampling teams, leading to the confirmation of ongoing oil contamination in various coastal areas.

Impact on marine life and food safety

The Lobitos fishing community remains deeply concerned about the health of marine resources, particularly the goose barnacle ("Percebe"), a culturally and economically important species. Despite the urgency, SANIPES has yet to conduct tests for hydrocarbon contamination in local fisheries, even after nearly two months since the spill.

The ongoing fight for environmental and social justice

There is still a long way to go in securing environmental and social justice for affected communities. The people of Lobitos, alongside local organizations and independent advocates, continue to demand:

- Greater transparency from Petroperú, including full disclosure of environmental impact assessments.
- Stronger enforcement of cleanup efforts, ensuring complete oil removal and ecosystem recovery.
- Financial compensation for affected fishers, who remain without income due to contaminated fishing waters.
- Immediate action from SANIPES, including hydrocarbon contamination testing for marine species vital to local fisheries and food security.

The oil spill has exposed deep governance failures in Peru's environmental management and corporate accountability systems, reinforcing a long-standing pattern of neglect toward small-scale fishers. Until these issues are addressed, Lobitos' fishing community will continue to bear the burden of industrial exploitation and ecological degradation.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Peruvian law (The General Fisheries Law – Decreto Ley N° 25977) defines small-scale (artisanal) fisheries as fishing activities conducted with small boats (up to 15 meters in length and a maximum storage capacity of 32.6 cubic meters), without onboard refrigeration systems, and primarily operated by independent fishers or small cooperatives. These fisheries are labour-intensive, use traditional techniques, and operate within five nautical miles of the coast, which is a zone legally reserved for artisanal fishing.

Dealing with Justice

Community and institutional responses

Following the December 20, 2024, oil spill caused by Petroperú, the community of Lobitos mobilized to demand accountability and action. A meeting was scheduled for December 24, where Petroperú representatives were expected to address community concerns, but they failed to attend. Frustrated by the lack of response, the people of Lobitos organized a peaceful protest, voicing their anger over the environmental disaster and Petroperú's inaction.

Later that day, after the protest, local leader Ivan Vite arrived at a meeting with the Regional Government of Piura, carrying a printed copy of Supreme Decree No. 081-2007-MINAM, Annex 4, which guarantees the right of communities to demand social and environmental justice. Presenting the law to officials, Ivan formally requested a structured and legally binding response to the crisis. His advocacy helped open direct communication between the Lobitos community and Petroperú, leading to an agreement for an official meeting in Lobitos on December 27.

Initial agreements and government response

As a result of these negotiations, Petroperú committed to providing immediate aid, including a) two water tankers per week for three months to supply clean water and b) an economic incentive for affected families to mitigate financial losses.

The community's mobilization also led to government intervention. On December 27, 2024, MINAM issued Ministerial Resolution No. 00443-2024-MINAM, officially declaring an environmental emergency for 90 business days. The decree covered affected areas in Talara, Lobitos, and El Alto, impacting 47.14 hectares of intertidal zones (shoreline areas) and 228.74 hectares of subtidal zones (underwater areas).

Government monitoring and sanctions against Petroperú

In response to the emergency declaration, government institutions, including OEFA, SANIPES, ANA and MINAM, were required to report their actions weekly in multisectoral virtual meetings. According to Official Letter 07-2025/GRP-450000, issued by the Regional Government of Piura, OEFA confirmed that hydrocarbon levels in water and sediment samples exceeded environmental quality standards. As a result, six administrative measures were imposed on Petroperú, including:

- Identification and control of the spill source – Petroperú failed to provide a satisfactory explanation, leading to a fine of 36 UIT (\$52,061.26 USD).
- Full recovery of the spilled hydrocarbons, which remains a critical and unresolved issue.

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Dealing with Justice

Discrepancies in spill volume and community oversight

A key unresolved question is how much oil was actually spilled. Petroperú's official report (GOTL-0539-2025) estimates a spill of 9.05 barrels, claiming they have recovered 4.96 barrels so far. However, OEFA is currently verifying these figures, as community members have contested these estimates based on observed contamination levels and fishery disruptions.

Additionally, OEFA's environmental inspections initially excluded community representatives, preventing local oversight. After community demands, OEFA's Evaluation Unit allowed local observers to accompany sampling teams, confirming the continued presence of hydrocarbon granules on beaches.

Concerns for marine life and food safety

The community of Lobitos remains deeply concerned about the impact on marine resources, particularly the goose barnacle (Percebe), a species of both commercial and cultural significance that has been severely affected by the spill. Despite the urgency, SANIPES has not yet conducted hydrocarbon contamination tests on this species, leaving unanswered questions about food safety and long-term ecological impacts.

Community-led initiatives: Local organizations driving change

While the Peruvian government has taken reactive measures, much of the on-the-ground response has come from local organizations, youth leaders, and grassroots movements. These initiatives have focused on environmental justice, youth capacity-sharing, and economic tenacity for small-scale fishers.

WAVES Lobitos: Surf, education, and youth empowerment

Led by Henry Espinoza Panta, the son of a local fisher, WAVES Lobitos provides surfing lessons, environmental education, and leadership development for local youth. By bridging the gap between surf tourism and the local fishing community, WAVES Lobitos ensures that economic opportunities are more equitably distributed among residents.

Coast 2 Coast Movement (C2C): Youth-led conservation and storytelling

Coast 2 Coast Movement (C2C) works with rural schools and small-scale fishing communities through youth action research, audiovisual storytelling, and ocean play. C2C engages students and educators in exploring their coastal environments, documenting intergenerational knowledge, and producing creative outputs like films, murals, and maps. This initiative connects Lobitos with global small-scale fishing communities in Nigeria, Madagascar, and India, co-creating lesson plans that help youth understand their rights and monitor the implementation of the SSF Guidelines as an international policy instrument.

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Over two months, the fundraising campaign raised nearly \$12,000 USD, providing critical resources for legal advocacy, community-led environmental monitoring, and direct support to affected fishers and families. This initiative demonstrated the power of grassroots mobilization in securing financial and logistical support where institutional responses fell short.

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Dealing with justice

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Despite these community-driven efforts, small-scale fishers in Lobitos continue to face systemic injustices, including limited legal protections, exclusion from decision-making, and environmental degradation. Academia and civil society organizations, such as TBTI Global have played a crucial role in documenting injustices, advocating for policy reform, and connecting Lobitos' struggles to global discussions on small-scale fisheries governance.

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Local leadership and community fundraising for justice

Following the oil spill, local leadership emerged in the form of Ivan Vite, a former WAVES Lobitos and Coast 2 Coast participant who has played a key role in community advocacy. As a result, Ivan was instrumental in creating the local committee overseeing Petroperú's cleanup efforts, ensuring greater transparency, accountability, and local involvement in environmental monitoring. His leadership bridges grassroots activism with institutional advocacy, reinforcing the need for stronger corporate responsibility in extractive industries.

Additionally, a small group of local youth and foreign residents—friends deeply connected to the community—launched a fundraising campaign to support recovery and accountability efforts.

The path toward Blue Justice

To achieve Blue Justice, Lobitos will require:

- Stronger governance protections to uphold fishing rights and community participation in decision-making.
- Corporate accountability to ensure full remediation of environmental disasters like the Petroperú oil spill.
- Sustainable infrastructure planning that prioritizes coastal communities over speculative tourism development.
- Greater investment in public services, particularly in clean water access, waste management, and education.
- The tenacity, adaptability, and care of local organizations and small-scale fishing leaders demonstrate the power of community-driven advocacy, but enduring action is needed to secure a just and sustainable future for Lobitos' small-scale fishing community.

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Photo: Crude oil covers the beach at Las Capullanas, a sacred biocultural heritage site for the Lobitos fishing community, Peru. 2024. © Henry Espinoza Panta

