



ZEPA: A real hope for our people

Written by Tirso Virgilio Villalba Pacheco
& Viviana Ramírez-Luna
April 15, 2017

The following story illustrates the development of the Exclusive Zone for Artisanal Fisheries (ZEPA) in the Chocó Province, Colombia. The story is told from the perspective of Tirso Virgilio Villalba Pacheco, a local fisherman from Huina who was elemental for the establishment of ZEPA, and Viviana Ramirez-Luna, a biologist and TBTI member who studied ZEPA as part of her Master's degree.

Through this story, Tirso and Viviana will bring you a piece of artisanal fisheries in Colombia and tell you how the community of Huina has benefited from the ZEPA,

which was fought by many communities and established in 2008 by the government. This story is also a tribute to Angel Melanio Villalba Palacio, who Tirso describes as "A fisherman, teacher, and father. Exemplary person, he is the driving force for the development of Huina. He is a

"I started realizing that the real problems with the fisheries in my region had to do with artisanal nets and industrial vessels."

role model for others ahead, to whom I owe the person I am today. I did not have enough time to learn more of him. He rests in peace".

Establishing the ZEPA - Tirso's story

In 1995, I started working as a Fisheries Technician with the fisheries agency called National Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture (INPA) back then. While participating in a project called EXPARTP (Experimentation with New Fishing Gears) I started realizing that the real problems with the fisheries in my region had to do with artisanal nets and industrial vessels.

Back then, it was very common to find different types of fishing nets along the coast including gillnets and beach seines. I also started noticing industrial shrimp and tuna vessels fishing within the first nautical mile. Shrimpers would drag away artisanal

We of the Sea is a TBTI publication series that presents stories and experiences of small-scale fishing people, communities and organizations, told in their own voices using their own expression and images. Through the people's perspective, We of the Sea portrays key essence and meaning of small-scale fisheries and invites us to dive into the world that we may or may not be familiar with.

Produced by
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fishing gears and would not return those gears nor would they compensate owners for the loss. Tuna vessels would seine in grounds where artisanal fishers were fishing, disturbing the ecosystem, damaging coral and catching species that were not commercially important, and throwing back to the water fish that was already dead. Despite the complaints and protests against industrial fishers, our government never listened or supported us. For the government, protection of our fishing resources and the food security of our communities were never a priority. When it comes to the surveillance at sea, the government priority has always been to fight against drug traffickers.

While working with the INPA, I started talking to Huina fishermen about working together and banning artisanal gillnetting within our coast. Then fishers themselves started questioning the use of gillnets between 10 and 40 m of depth, which is where the juvenile stages of important species in our region are found. There was not a significant change in the rest of our municipality, so in 2007 I wrote a letter to the National Director of Fisheries, Ministry of Agriculture, Mr. Carlos Robles. I described harmful activities that caused concern among artisanal fishers and how these activities threaten the long-term sustainability of the fishery. These activities included gillnetting in deep waters; scuba and free diving with commercial purposes as opposed to recreational; beach seine nets on rocky and reef areas; and industrial tuna seining in coastal waters. I provided details of how each activity was conducted, the negative effects, and what the government could do to stop them. Unfortunately, I never received a formal response to this letter.

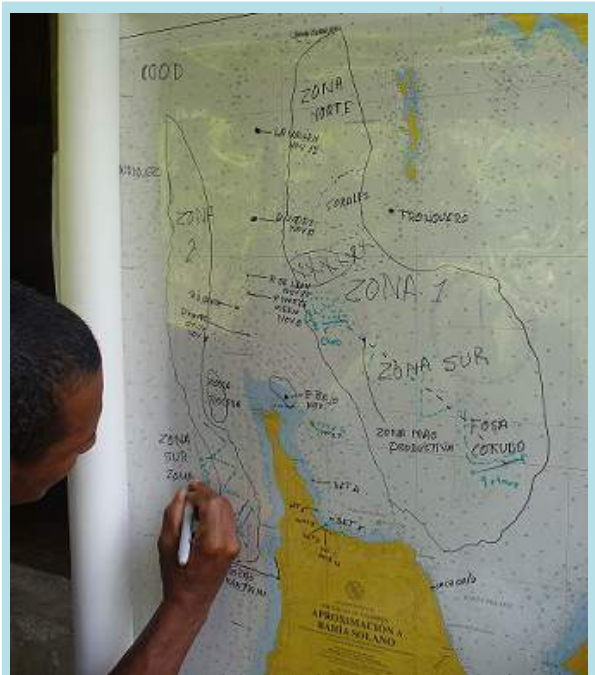


Tuna caught within the ZEPA

Also in 2007, a tuna vessel was reported to have invaded our fishing grounds. The local authorities brought the vessel to the port but they released it a few hours later. This caused a lot of anger in our community as we viewed this as an act of corruption in which the government favoured the tuna sector. This was a watershed moment that brought together the fishing community (artisanal, sport, and fish processors), which for years saw the industrial fishers as their enemies. We decided to fight that enemy.

In 2008, the fishing community elected a person who would be our voice during the meetings held with the government and the industrial sector. The pathway towards sustainable fisheries that started in my community and all the efforts initiated in the 1990s by individuals and organizations along the coast of Chocó to mitigate conflicts with the industrial sector, lead to the negotiations and, eventually, to the establishment of the ZEPA in 2008.





Mapping Tirso's fishing grounds.

What does the ZEPA look like? - Viviana's research

The ZEPA extends seaward to about 2.5 NM from the coastline, and from Panama's border (north) to the Utría National Park (south, see bottom of page). It includes two major urban centers: Juradó (ca. 5,000 people) and Bahía (ca. 9,000 people) and roughly 23 villages including Huina, which has a population of ca. 180 inhabitants (as of the late 1990s). Inside the ZEPA, there is a ban on artisanal gillnets and beach seines, commercial exploratory fisheries, and industrial fisheries. Inside and outside the ZEPA, artisanal longlines and handlines, subsistence and sport fisheries are allowed.

In 2013 the National Authority of Aquaculture and Fisheries (AUNAP), declared the ZEPA permanent, following multiple studies on artisanal and industrial fisheries (specifically shrimp fishery) conducted since 2008. Studies showed the importance of artisanal fisheries in the area and the negative impact of shrimp fisheries on local resources. The AUNAP also added a Special Zone for the Management of Fishing Resources (ZEMP) to enhance resource protection to 12 NM (see page 4). However, industrial tuna seiners and tuna long-line vessels of certain characteristics are allowed to fish inside this special zone.

The ZEPA benefits at least 700 fishers and their families, which also carry out other activities including agriculture, cattle farming, tourism, sport fisheries, construction, and commerce. Commercially, the most important fish species in the area include longfin yellowtail (*Seriola*), tuna (*Thunnus*), sierra (*Scomberomorus*), brotula (*Brotula*), and different species of jacks (*Caranx*), snappers (*Lutjanus*), groupers (*Serranidae*), and billfish (*Istiophoridae*). Researchers have identified at least 68 fish species predominantly caught with hooks (handlines and longlines) and to a lesser extent with nets (gillnets and beach seines, even after the ban). These species are fished using wooden and fiberglass boats that range between 3 and 13m.

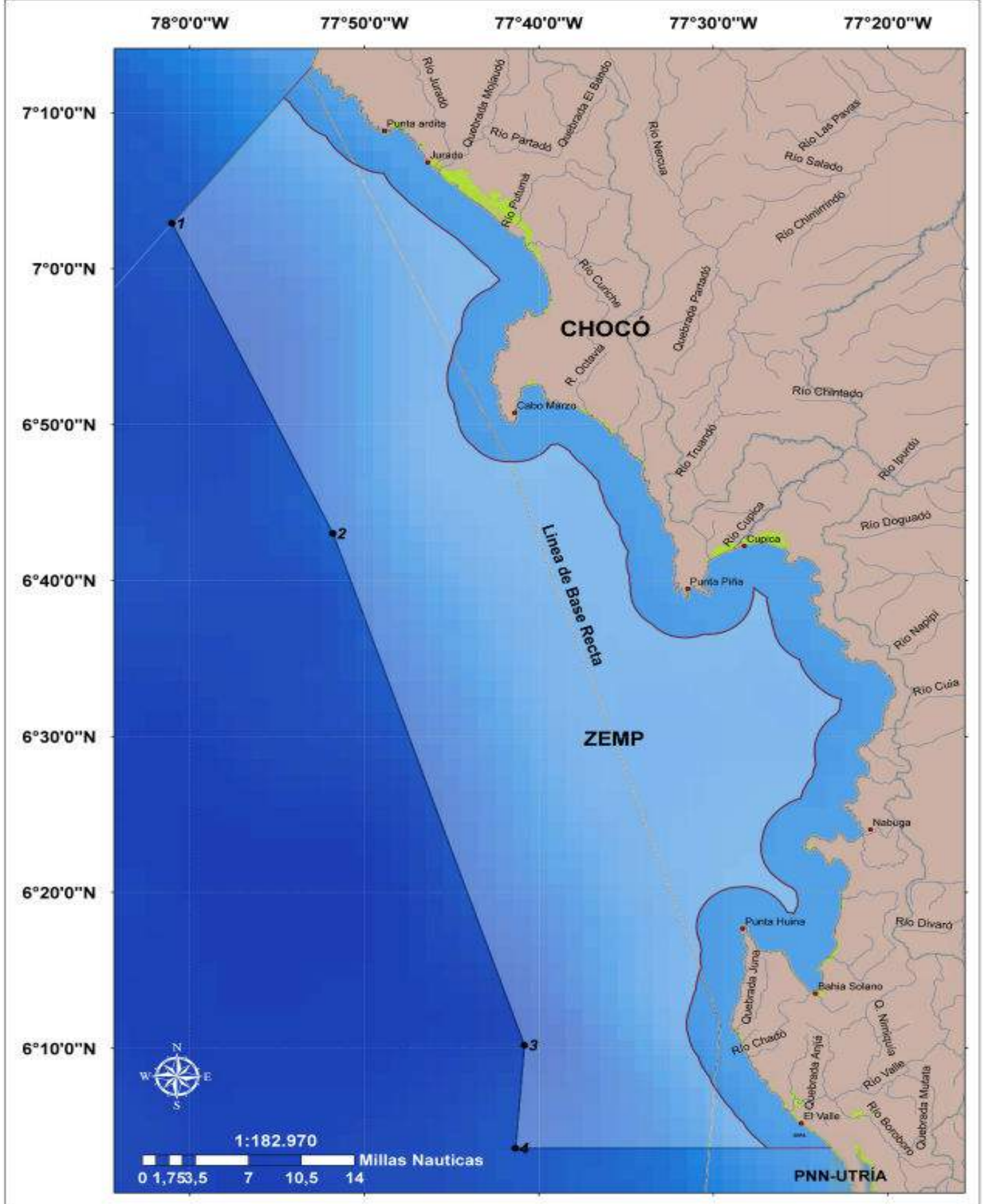


Huina's fisheries before and after the ZEPA

Before the ZEPA, our fisheries were a mess. They were not very productive, some species were overexploited due to the use of nets in grounds where juvenile stages are found, there was no respect for small-sized fish, and there was no conservation awareness of any kind. On top of that, the industrial vessels in our waters made fishing even harder. Catches of species associated to rocky ecosystems, such as snappers and longfin yellowtail, and muddy ecosystems, such as brotula and roosters, were the lowest. Tuna catch sizes were the smallest in our history and some species such as billfish, marlins, and dolphinfish almost disappeared.



Map of the ZEPA's extension (2008-2013)



Establecimiento de la Zona Económica exclusiva de la Pesca Artesanal (ZEP) y una Zona Especial de Manejo Pesquero (ZEMP)

Resolución No. 899 del 29 de Julio de 2013

Realizado por: Christian Bustamante (Profesional AUNAP);
Colaboradores: Johanna Gutierrez (Contratista AUNAP)
Global reference System, 1980 (WGS84)

- CONVENCIONES**
- Zonas de importancia Area ZEP.
 - Zona Económica de Pesca Artesanal (ZEP)
 - Zona Especial de Manejo Pesquero (ZEMP)
 - LINEA DE BASE RECTA (LBR)
 - Drenaje_sencillo
 - ZONA DE MANGLE
 - AREA MARINA PNN UTRÍA

Huina's fisheries before and after the ZEPA

After eight years of the ZEPA, our fisheries have improved significantly in terms of fish size and catch volume. All the fish stock seems to be rebuilding, except for dolphinfish, which has not recovered as expected or it is happening very slowly. In terms of stewardship, local fishermen have realized that it is our responsibility to fight and work together to protect our resources and achieve sustainability over time. We have realized that participation in the protection of our resources brings many benefits. For instance, tourism and sport fisheries have been reactivated thanks to the ZEPA. Today, our community is one of the top destinations in Colombia given the high diversity of sport fish species.

The challenges

The ZEPA did not only bring about adjustments to the industrial sector but to the artisanal sector too. The ban on nets posed a challenge to artisanal gillnetters and beach seiners. By 2010, the government planned to implement a gear exchange project to replace nets with hooks. In Bahía, some artisanal fishers argued unfairness since industrial fishers were allowed to use nets while others complained about the economic loss. Some artisanal fishers owned many gillnets and thought that they would receive too many hooks to compensate for the cost of their gillnets. Hooks could be used to build longlines, but by 2010, longlining was not a profitable fishery. Even though the use of nets is not widespread in our communities, convincing netters to give up their gears has been a slow process.



Arriving on a rainy day.

Moving Forward

What we envision

Extension of the ZEPA

This is a very important topic. In the future, it is expected that the ZEPA, supported by the law, will exclude the industrial tuna fishery from domestic waters. Expanding the ZEPA will prevent the government from issuing fishing licences to those vessels, which come from Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico and other countries and are damaging local stocks as well as local communities. Expansion of the ZEPA means respect of our territorial seas.

What we need

We need the support from the local, regional, and national community to design an effective surveillance and control strategy for the ZEPA. Such support would also help to create a management area that will integrate the rainforest and the marine environment already protected by the ZEPA and that in the adjacent waters. This would in turn enhance the protection of a land-sea area, which is of great importance not only for our communities but also for Colombia and for the planet.

Government support

The efforts of local people to protect our species and watch for industrial vessels require support from the government, which often forgets the initial purpose of the ZEPA: to conduct surveillance and support the artisanal fishing sector.

Fair supply chain network

It is important to implement a fair supply chain network (i.e. storage, transport, and trade) that distributes profits among our fishermen. This would increase our income, contribute to food security, and enhance the quality of life of families in our region.



Tirso (left) interviewing Melanio, to whom we dedicate this story.

What other communities can learn from us

All fishing communities that have the same problems can come together, take our process and adapt it to their communities. This is the way to protect their livelihoods in the future. I think it is better to develop new ideas and work towards improving them, rather than sitting down and waiting for other people to make it happen.

Viviana's reflection

Different events inspired the study on the ZEPA. I wanted to learn more about the “behind the scenes” of the decision-making process of the ZEPA. I learned that the ZEPA is one of the most important achievements of the coastal artisanal fisheries in Colombia. It was established through a lengthy and dynamic process, involved fishing communities, local and national government agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations, and has received a lot of media attention. It brought fisheries management to a whole new level bringing about (heated) discussions about human rights of black communities, local traditional knowledge, and territory. The ZEPA has empowered communities by showing them that they can achieve their goals when they come together.

"The ZEPA has empowered communities by giving them back the confidence that they can achieve their goals when they come together."



About the authors

Tirso Virgilio Villalba Pacheco is native to the Community of Huina (Town of Bahía Solano, Chocó, Colombia) where he has been a leader in the stewardship and conservation of marine resources. He comes from a fishing family and has been fishing since childhood. As all kids in Huina, he started fishing in small brooks and as he grew older, he ventured into the ocean, learning from experienced fishers. Today, Tirso is a Fisheries Technician, Artisanal Fisherman, Dive Master, and Sport Fishing Skipper. He teaches his children the art of fishing, and has been involved in the process of creating the ZEPA.

Viviana Ramírez-Lunais is a Biologist and a TBTI Member, originally from Cali, Valle, Colombia. She is currently living in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Viviana conducted studies on local artisanal fisheries in northern Chocó between 2006 and 2013. Her Master's thesis *The Exclusive Fishing Zone for the Artisanal Fishery in Chocó Colombia: Origins, Development, and Consequences for Artisanal Fisheries and Food Security* provided a detailed account of the pre- and post-implementation processes associated with the ZEPA and its consequences for fish stocks as well as for artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen and their families.

How to cite:

T.V., Villalba Pacheco & V., Ramírez-Luna (2017). ZEPA: A real hope for our people. *We of the Sea*. W-01/17: toobigtoignore.net

Photo credits:

Tirso Virgilio Villalba Pacheco & Viviana Ramírez-Luna. Viviana would like to thank AUNAP for the use of the ZEPA/ZEMP map.

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