

Struggling with regulatory and procedural injustices: Small-scale fisheries of Merikarvia, Finland



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The village of Merikarvia on the Finnish Bothnian Sea coast boasts a long fishing tradition. Commercial fishing in Merikarvia is operated mostly on a family basis by using small outboard motorboats. Fishing is seasonal and targets a variety of species. The catch is sold either locally – fresh or processed – or to wholesalers. Overall, the fishers have adapted their strategies to deal with the changes in the availability of fish, demand for fish products and technological development. For instance, as the demand for salted herring decreased in the 20th century, fishers adopted stationary long line fishing for Baltic salmon in autumn months, which enabled sharing of economic risks through fishing co-operation. Salmon is now captured mostly by large trap nets, a method that was extensively used in the Baltic herring fisheries. In the beginning of the 1960s driftnet fisheries for European whitefish quickly became an important element in the local fishing culture. Today, fish processing and selling of the products directly to the consumers has increased in importance, along with a decrease in landings. Consequently, the role of spouses in the Merikarvia fishing families has become crucial again, especially their input in fish processing and the work with customers.

Photo: *Salmon trap net fishing in Merikarvia, Finland. 2004*
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Location:
Merikarvia, Finland

Ecosystem type:
Brackish

Main gear:
Gillnet, traps

Target species:
Baltic herring, Baltic salmon, European whitefish, perch

Vessel type:
Fiber glass boats

No. of small-scale fishers:
35

” ... Seals mostly cause direct losses, while cormorants induce changes in fish stocks and fish behavior. In Merikarvia, seals cause bigger problems to small-scale fisheries than the cormorants, partly because of harassments in a large, near-by cormorant colony. Seals cause severe losses in both trap net and gillnet fishing...

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Justice in context

Types of justice:

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

The most problematic justice issue in Merikarvia is connected to the growing animal populations that have decreased the volume of marketable fish and increased operational costs. Grey seals and cormorants dive into fishing gear where they eat fish, damage the fish and fishing nets, and scare away the fish. Opportunities for action to mitigate these losses are limited by international agreements, such as the EU Birds Directive, and the national interpretations and decisions thereof. Fishers feel that their interests and local knowledge are disregarded in managing the conflicts: they are left aside from the decision-making process about crucial issues that affect their livelihood and the future of the local coastal fishing culture.

Since the 1980s, commercial salmon fisheries have been strictly regulated by the State. This has caused negative effects on the Merikarvia village, one of the main locations of coastal salmon fisheries in Finland. The top-down regulations started to erode fishers' concept of the occupation as an independent and self-sustaining profession. In 2008, drift net fishing in the Baltic Sea was banned by the EU, motivated by conservation of the porpoise. Like in other coastal locations, small-scale fishers in Merikarvia considered this intervention as another example of unjust centralized decision-making based on insufficient knowledge since, for instance, porpoises have seldom entered Finnish coastal areas. The ban terminated not only open sea netting for salmon, but also traditional drift net fisheries for Baltic herring and European whitefish. Thus, the ban instantly ended an essential part of the local fishing culture in Merikarvia without prior consideration about the local consequences.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Small-scale fisheries are not explicitly defined in Finish legislation. In general, small-scale fisheries include all lake fisheries and coastal fishers that use boats less than 12m in length and a range of gears, except for trawls that target Baltic herring and sprat.

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Dealing with justice

Local community's support alleviates fishers' frustration in the era of hierarchic environmental and fisheries governance systems. The municipality of Merikarvia has supported developing harbour facilities for fish landing and processing, and tourism projects that are based on the specific local fishing culture and history. In addition, an association called the 'Friends of the Bothnian Sea National Park' has organized local projects to improve the awareness of commercial fisheries and its role. These include the 'Vocabulary of a sea fisher' which documented old sayings and beliefs, and local terms used for fishing, gear, vehicles and natural phenomena. Stories related to fishing sites and cabins were also documented and published. This, together with other similar projects, has informed the general public about the cultural, economic and social importance of the livelihood, and thus strengthened the Merikarvia fishers' livelihood, identity and connectiveness.

The Finnish fisheries governance system has provided the fishers with support in trying to cope with the seal and cormorant conflicts. For reducing the seal-induced losses in particular, special seal-proof fishing gear and deterrence devices have been developed and investment subsidies granted to some Merikarvia fishers. This technical and financial support may partly mitigate the feeling of injustice among the fishers, but they consider that the major path for managing the conflict would include actions towards reducing both seal and cormorant populations, and in restoring the timid behavior of the animals. Lately, the regional Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAG), funded by the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and the municipality, has also started to foster locally initiated projects for developing fishing livelihood of Merikarvia. In addition to tangible benefits, the bottom-up FLAG approach helps fishers in dealing with the injustices by providing them with opportunities to influence the future of their livelihood.

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