

# **From bedrock of the economy to marginalized industry: Small-scale fisheries in the Turks and Caicos Islands**



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The Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) is a small-island nation (pop. <50,000) in the Wider Caribbean Region. Export fisheries supplied by small-scale fishers were once the country's dominant industry, but are now increasingly overshadowed by luxury tourism, offshore finance, and construction. The fishing industry in the TCI targets multiple species using a range of different gears. The main focus is spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*) and queen conch (*Aliger gigas*), both for export (US market) and domestic consumption. There is also a smaller local market for reef fishes, turtle, bonefish, sharks, and crab. As the resident population and number of tourists continue to increase, the demand for seafood outweighs local supply and is largely met through imports. Every Turks and Caicos Islander has the right to harvest seafood, but a commercial fishing license is required to fish for profit. There are about 250 commercially licensed fishers in TCI, of which only 120 could be considered full-time, while the rest fish opportunistically, particularly focusing on the historically lucrative start of the spiny lobster season. Fishing is typically carried out from small vessels (<6 m; outboard engines <100HP) with a crew of two free-divers and one driver. Seafood processing plants dominate the industry and dictate the ex-vessel price and species targeted. Consequently, most fishers cannot access different markets or negotiate prices.

**Photo:**  
Fishing dock in South Caicos, Turks and Caicos Islands. Year: 2015.  
Author: Marta C. Calosso

**Location:**  
Turks and Caicos Islands, UK Overseas Territory

**Ecosystem type:**  
Marine

**Main gear:**  
Lobster hook, Hawaiian sling, trap, hook and line, spear gun, gillnet, seine net

**Target species:**  
Spiny lobster, queen conch, reef fishes, bonefish, sharks, crab, turtle

**Vessel type:**  
small vessels (<6 m; outboard engines <100HP)

**No. of small-scale fishing vessels:**  
Ca. 200 commercially licensed

**No. of small-scale fishers:**  
Ca. 250 commercially licensed

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## Justice in context

Types of justice:

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

Since the TCI has established itself as a top luxury tourist destination, small-scale fisheries (SSF) have become marginalized, and the interests of fisherfolk are neglected. Livelihood security in SSF is in decline, while the cost of living is now among the world's highest. Few Turks and Caicos Islanders seek work as fishers, and even fewer as low-paid fish workers. The stigma against these jobs is reinforced by problems with drugs, alcohol, and gambling which are perceived to be common among fishers, and by the rise in low-paid immigrants (mostly from Haiti) working in the industry. Livelihoods are further jeopardized through recurrent delays in processing licenses and decisions concerning fishing seasons and quotas.

Fisherfolk have little voice in the governance of their industry or marine resources in general. While there are formal structures such as the Fisheries Advisory Committee and other consultation processes, they are flawed or ineffective. There are no fisherfolk organizations providing advocacy and fishers do not act in a unified way. Thus, the interests of fisherfolk are not well represented, and immigrant fishers and fish workers have effectively no voice at all. Consequently, fisherfolk voices are drowned out by those of other industries.

Many fishers and fish workers are unable to seek other markets or other forms of employment, especially immigrants who are only allowed to work for the entity which secured their work permits (e.g. seafood processing plants and boat owners). During periods of low landings (e.g. bad weather, closed seasons, COVID-19 pandemic), immigrant fishers and fish workers have little to no income, and legally cannot work elsewhere. Furthermore, immigrant employees are often required to pay off expenses that employers should cover, such as flights and work permits. Non-immigrant fishers can also get trapped in vicious cycles of debt and can become tied to processing plants by taking loans to purchase gear, maintain vessels, and to cover living expenses during closed seasons.

### Definition of small-scale fisheries

Small-scale fisheries are not defined.

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*While the country has good employment laws generally, the working conditions for fisherfolk remain inadequate, and safety is an issue particularly for fishers.*

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## Justice in context (cont'd)

Fishers have lost some traditional fishing grounds through the establishment of multiple no-take marine protected areas (MPAs), under the TCI National Parks Ordinance. This includes a large Ramsar Site off North and Middle Caicos. In addition, a 'lobster and conch reserve' was implemented under the Fisheries Protection Ordinance. All MPAs overlap with traditional fishing areas, and the Ramsar Site effectively turned some traditional fishers into poachers with limited options to fish elsewhere without substantial investment in gear and/or vessels.

Enforcement capacity is limited and mostly focuses on monitoring landings at the processing plants. Due to low resources, the government lacks data to inform management, the capacity to act strategically, and corruption is a systemic issue. Enforcement activities disproportionately target fisherfolk who can least afford it, whereas the well-organized, well-financed, industrial poaching operations that work out of neighboring countries (mainly the Dominican Republic) are largely left unaddressed.

While the country has good employment laws generally, the working conditions for fisherfolk remain inadequate, and safety is an issue particularly for fishers. There is no formal government rescue service for vessels in distress, and required safety equipment (e.g., VHF radio, life vests, flares) is typically lacking on small fishing boats. However, indebted and immigrant fishers are not in strong positions to demand safer vessels from which to work. Furthermore, due to unpredictable and seasonal incomes, many fishers do not have full health coverage despite a National Health Insurance Plan designed to cover workers and their dependents.

## Dealing with justice

To date, little has been done to resolve these injustices.



### How to cite

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