

# The sea-side of coal mining: Resisting coal ports in the Caribbean coast of Colombia



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In Colombia, there is a lack of clarity on who owns and controls access to different fishing resources. Historically, this has led to a plethora of socio-environmental conflicts, which, in turn, demand institutional responses and policies. Small-scale fishers have been socially, politically, and economically marginalized, and remain largely excluded from official coastal and marine ordering and managing decision-making arenas (Saavedra-Díaz et al. 2016). This has privileged top-down approaches to fisheries management that overlook the heterogeneous coastal realities in the country's Pacific and Caribbean coasts while benefiting the economic interests of extractive industries. However, centralized regulatory processes have had weak enforcement and monitoring of marine resources and fishing practices (Jiménez and Saavedra-Díaz 2019).

Nationally, artisanal fishers have limited access to basic services, including sewage, electricity, transportation, education, health care, and pension (Saavedra-Díaz et al. 2015). In this context, small-scale fisheries (SSF) have and continue to be primarily governed by informal place-based institutional processes and market incentives.

Photo: *Fishers fishing with gillnets in Tasajera, Colombia.*  
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**Location:**

Magdalena State: Don Jaca, Bello Horizonte, Ciénaga, and Tasajera communities, Colombia

**Ecosystem type:**

Marine, brackish

**Main gear:**

Cast net, gillnet, gleaning, hook & line, seine net, surrounding net, traps, trawls

**Target species:**

Multi-specific fisheries

**Vessel type:**

Motorboat

**No. of small-scale fishers:**

950

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## Justice in context

Types of justice:

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

Coastal communities in Don Jaca, Bello Horizonte, Ciénaga, and Tasajera, on the Caribbean Coast, rely on fishing as their main source of income and protein in local diets. Since the late 1970s, this area has experienced rampant coastal development and been dramatically impacted by infrastructure projects linked to coalmine port terminals. Although very little is known about the impacts of the mining sector on SFF in Colombia, these ports have overlapped SSF traditional territories, polluted water sources, and destroyed artisanal fishing grounds.

These four communities have struggled with the construction of port infrastructure and operations in and nearby their traditional fishing grounds. Moreover, port authorities working for multinational mining companies have restricted their access to traditional coastal-marine territories and fishing areas. Coastal communities have experienced a reduction of fish abundance, disappearance of certain species and witnessed traces of coal contaminants in fish meat. The ports have contaminated and destroyed the traditional fishing grounds in the areas of influence, leading to the rapid reduction of fishing yields, while dispossessing and displacing artisanal fishers both on land and at sea. The significant reduction of yields in Don Jaca and Ciénaga started in 2004, followed by Tasajera in 2005, and Bello Horizonte in 2006. There has also been an increase in respiratory and cardiovascular diseases linked to coal mining and dust contaminants, particularly in Don Jaca since 2002, Ciénaga in 2010, Tasajera in 2012, and Bello Horizonte in 2013.

### Definition of small-scale fisheries (see Decree 1071, 2015, Article 2.16.1.2.8)

In Colombia, SSF are legally divided into subsistence fishing (pesca de subsistencia) and commercial artisanal fishing (pesca comercial artesanal). Within this legal framework subsistence fishing is defined by law decree as the capture and extraction of fishing resources in small volumes (daily catches of up to 5 kg), part of which may be sold (for nonprofit purposes), in order to guarantee the minimum vital for the fishers and their family nucleus. This fishing can be exercised freely throughout the national territory. Commercial artisanal fishing is performed individually or by organized fishers (working for companies, cooperatives, or other associations). These fishers are independent workers, using small-system fishing gears for small-scale production (daily catches of up to 40 kg).\*

\*Authors consider that this definition should also include a gendered lens that accounts not only for fishers at sea but for everyone involved – primarily women – in the preparation, cleaning, and handling of fish.

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## Dealing with justice

In response to the conflict, fishers in Don Jaca, Bello Horizonte, Ciénaga, and Tasajera organized peaceful protests, mass demonstrations, and press releases. They wrote petitions to the Communal Council and governors. These efforts sought to increase the social, political, and economic support given to SSF struggles.

In 2014 and 2015, these communities sued the Colombian State and the coalmine port and exporting companies (Drummond Ltda., American Port Company Inc.). Civil lawsuits were filed in Bello Horizonte and Don Jaca in 2014, and Ciénaga and Tasajera in 2015, requesting direct reparation. Their allegations included financial hardship, fishing issues and health threats from coalmine contaminants spilled by port activities; and the violation of the rights to free development of personality; work; freedom of trade, occupation and profession; minimum wage; a healthy environment; and food security. Communities received support from: the Major and Promigas (Ciénaga); the European Union (Tasajera); the Universidad del Magdalena (Bello Horizonte); and Invemar (Don Jaca).

The first hearings took place in 2019, and the judicial procedures continue. Communities are awaiting a sentence, which they hope will prove that port and coalmine companies are legally responsible for the social, environmental, and economic detriment they have experienced. Fishing is no longer profitable as current catches cannot even cover fuel expenses. The long-term and the gendered impact of coalmine ports in fishers' livelihoods, wellbeing, and lives remains uncertain.

This case is informed by the Bachelor thesis of Cordero and Leyva (2019), who conducted focus groups and reconstructed a history line of the conflict with fishers in the communities of Don Jaca, Bello Horizonte, Ciénaga and Tasajera.

### References

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Photo below: B. Coal particle of 8mm (~0.31 inches). By Juan Pablo Ibañez-Reyes, modified from Herrera et al. (2011, 136).



### How to cite

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