

FOOD REPORT



Food Report 1

SMALL-SCALE FISHING IN A SYSTEM THAT WORKS AGAINST IT

Why does the system keep low-impact fish out of reach?

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SMALL-SCALE, OR LOW-IMPACT FISHING:
DOSSIER

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Spanish small-scale fishers are not allowed to sell their catch directly to restaurants or final consumers. A national law, almost unique within the European Union, obliges them to carry out the first sale through a Dutch auction system, where the buyer sets the price. From that point onward, fish begin a long journey to the final consumer, where they are mixed with trawl-caught fish, imported fish, and aquaculture products.

Behind labels such as “auction-market fish” or “locally sourced fish”, there is often fish caught using trawling, a fishing technique classified by the EU as industrial regardless of vessel size, and responsible for a significant share of fishing discards and the depletion of seabeds.

This report analyses the situation of artisanal or small-scale fishing, the only type considered to have a low environmental impact. It warns of the difficulties faced in Spain, where legislation, unlike in countries such as France or Italy, prohibits direct sales without passing through the auction market, forcing artisanal fishers to market their catch through the same channels and at the same prices as the trawling fleet. It also points to possible solutions, outlining regulatory measures and examples.

It further warns about the unchecked proliferation of “sustainable” and “local” claims, messages that not only confuse informed consumers, capable of agency and food-system transformation, but also mask the reality of fishing and the sea, preventing the construction of genuinely sustainable models.

This report is the first in a series that CoCo Sapiens will dedicate to the food system, its regulatory framework and realities, giving voice to producers and organizations, researchers and consumers, with the aim of providing tools. Focused on artisanal fishing, it features some of the most representative voices in this field, notably: Marta Cavallé, marine biologist and Executive Secretary of Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE); Isaac Moya, artisanal fisher from L'Estartit, founder of Projecte Sèpia and the direct-sales initiative Empesca't; and Joan Roca, chef of El Celler de Can Roca, repeatedly ranked as the best restaurant in the world.

“You cannot protect what you do not know.” Xavier Sala, founder and spokesperson of CoCo Sapiens.

INTRODUCTION.

The term “artisanal” has become a recurring marketing claim. It appears on labels, menus and institutional campaigns promoting “local products.” But what do we really mean when we talk about artisanal fishing? And why are small-scale fishers, those who work with selective gear, without trawling and on small vessels, disappearing? The rise of sustainability discourse hides a paradox that threatens the very essence of our perception of fishing and the sea.

While the European Union legislates on gear selectivity and the reduction of fishing discards, unwanted catches returned dead to the sea, Spanish marketing systems and regulations continue to favor large-scale industry and penalize small fishers.

The result is a model that rewards quantity over quality, pushing those who best practice sustainability to the brink of collapse.

In Spain, small-scale fishing, using traditional low-impact methods such as trammel nets, fish traps or bottom longlines, represents less than 20% of total catches, yet generates incalculable social and ecological value. These are fishers who go out at dawn on vessels under 12 meters in length, who know the tides, design their own nets and catch only what they need. Today, however, their survival is at risk.

STATE OF THE SEA.

According The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries de la FAO–GFCM, to The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries report by FAO–GFCM, 87% of Mediterranean fish stocks are overexploited, a situation that is particularly severe in the western Mediterranean, where a large part of the Spanish fleet operates.

Vessels under 12 meters in length, typical of artisanal fishing, account for nearly 80% of the fleet by number, but represent only about 15% of total catch volume, which highlights their lower impact despite their ecological and social importance.

This trend reflects not only an economic decline, but also the erosion of ancestral knowledge and of a balanced relationship with the sea: every artisanal vessel that is withdrawn leaves behind a living part of the Mediterranean’s cultural and ecological heritage.

According to artisanal fisher **Isaac Moya**, *“everything is designed for the large fleet, not for the small fisher.”* This statement summarizes the paradox of the system: the most sustainable fishers are the ones who face the greatest administrative and economic obstacles to continue working.

THE EMPESCA’T CASE.

The direct sale of fresh fish by fishers to restaurants or final consumers is not permitted under Spanish legislation. Royal Decree 418/2015 requires that all first sales be carried out through a fish auction or an authorized establishment, even when the product is traceable and subject to sanitary control at origin.

A situation that runs counter to what is provided for in European legislation, Regulation (EC) 1224/2009, Article 5.8, which allows direct sales from the vessel to the consumer up to a maximum value of 50 € per day, an option adopted by countries such as France or Italy. In these countries, fishers may invoice small quantities directly without passing through the auction market, or integrate into local or cooperative control systems.

In this context, Empesca't was created, a pilot program promoted by the Arts Menors Costa Brava association and authorized by the Government of Catalonia, which allowed the first sale to be carried out at the port itself through a supervised food contract and sanitary control at origin. Its direct-sale model and digital traceability system, with QR codes providing information on species, fishing gear and vessel, ensured full transparency and, above all, made it possible to establish a fair price for both the fisher and the consumer.

"I just want to know that I will sell my fish at a fair price, because with that I can make a living. We want to live from the sea, but without destroying it. We are only asking to sell our product directly, with names and surnames."

However, the administrative limitations of the pilot program itself prevented its economic viability: the number of authorized vessels was very limited, and it was not permitted to expand the participating fleet to the neighboring village, as had initially been planned. This restriction made it impossible to reach a sufficient volume of catches to cover the logistical costs of local distribution, generating a paradox: a model fully aligned with European principles of sustainability, traceability and social justice was forced to cease its activity due to the restrictions of Spanish state regulations.

On paper, the European Union recognizes the value of small-scale fishing. Article 17 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the Common Fisheries Policy requires Member States to allocate fishing rights "according to environmental, social and economic criteria." In practice, however, quotas continue to be allocated according to historical catches: those who caught more in the past receive more rights today. Once again, the big fish eats the small one, rewarding those who drive the overexploitation of the resource.

Today, consumers who believe they are supporting sustainability by buying "fish from the auction market" lack the tools to know whether that product comes from artisanal fishing or from trawling. Institutional and sector-led green claims merge both concepts under the same label: local product.

ORIGIN AND FISHING GEAR OF CATCHES: THE LABELLING ISSUE.

According to **Marta Cavallé**, a member of LIFE, *"Europe requires the fishing gear to be identified on the label of the fish we buy, but in practice we very rarely see these labels at the fishmonger's, so the consumer cannot know how that fish was caught."*

This confusion, far from being an administrative error, encapsulates a model that does not distinguish the true origin of fish, disguising industrial fishing under the discourse of proximity.

Several reports and studies by the [FAO](#), the European Parliament, [ClientEarth](#) and the scientific journal [MDPI Sustainability](#) (2023), show that many European consumers confuse "local fish" with "sustainable fish", even though the two concepts are not equivalent.

In the European Union, labels on fisheries products must indicate the catch area and the fishing gear used (such as trawling or trammel nets), in accordance with Regulation (UE) 1379/2013. However, this information does not automatically certify a low environmental impact, nor is it always presented clearly to consumers.

Recent reports by ClientEarth and the European Parliament have warned of gaps in oversight and frequent non-compliance with mandatory information on the origin or method of capture, especially in retail markets and distribution chains.

The FAO confirms that consumers value nearby origin as synonymous with fresh, high-quality fish, but confuse geographical proximity with environmental sustainability. As a result, fish caught by trawling may appear under the same “local product” claim as fish caught using small-scale fishing gear.

The European Commission acknowledged in its “[Green Claims Directive](#)” (2023/0085) that the proliferation of ambiguous environmental messages is one of the main obstacles to informed consumption.

In Spain, the Organisation of Consumers and Users - [Organización de Consumidores y Usuarios \(OCU\)](#) found that only 22% of fishmongers indicated the fishing gear on the product sign, in breach of Regulation (EU) 1379/2013.

Sustainability depends on the method of capture, its selectivity, its impact on the seabed, the carbon footprint, seasonality, the status and management of the resource, and effective traceability through to the final consumer, not solely on the distance from the port.

(FALSE) SUSTAINABILITY: BETWEEN GREEN DISCOURSE AND THE REALITY OF DISCARDS.

In recent years, the term “sustainable” has become an omnipresent commercial claim. It appears on supermarket shelves, in institutional discourse and even on restaurant menus. But what does sustainable fishing really mean?

In a kind of institutionalization of greenwashing, part of the fishing sector, including local fisheries, has adopted a language that does not correspond to reality. The problem is not only semantic; it is also structural: the current traceability and labelling system prevents distinguishing between industrial fishing and low-impact artisanal fishing.

Regulation (EU) 1379/2013 on the common organization of markets requires that all fish indicate the fishing gear used. In practice, however, this information is lost along the long path to the final consumer, from the moment fish is placed by box rather than by individual piece, giving rise to potential bad practices encouraged by the lack of control once the fish leaves the auction market. All of this contributes to the erosion of real traceability. In many points of sale, the required regulatory label is not even displayed, making it impossible to know whether the fish is wild or farmed, where it was caught, or with which gear, thus breaching European legislation.

In this way, products caught using destructive techniques such as trawling can be sold as “local fish” or “auction-market fish”, labels that consumers mistakenly associate with sustainability.

According to **Isaac Moya**: *“a sea bass caught by trawling 40 kilometers away can be sold as local. But a cuttlefish caught with artisanal traps and sold directly at the port is outside the system and, therefore, it is illegal to sell it without passing through the auction market. It is the world turned upside down.”*

DISCARDS, THE INVISIBLE WOUND OF THE SEA.

One of the greatest ecological impacts of industrial fishing is fishing discards: unwanted catches that are returned to the sea, generally dead or in poor condition. Since the entry into force of [Regulation \(UE\) n° 1380/2013](#), the landing obligation has officially prohibited this practice, but compliance remains limited.

According to the [FAO](#) and the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean - [Comité de Pesca del Mediterráneo \(GFCM\)](#), discard levels in the Mediterranean vary widely depending on the type of fishing gear and the area: in trawl fisheries they can represent up to one third of the total catch, whereas in artisanal or low-impact fisheries these rates are almost negligible due to the selectivity of their methods.

Scientific studies agree that discards constitute a structural problem inseparable from the industrial model, with serious ecological and socio-economic consequences that affect species regeneration, ecosystem resilience and the viability of coastal communities.

The impact of trawl fishing is not only environmental, but also economic, social and ethical: while artisanal fishing preserves biodiversity, creates local employment and ensures fresh, high-quality fish, the industrial model prioritizes volume over value, generating overexploitation.

A MODEL THAT PENALIZES SUSTAINABILITY.

Paradoxically, the most sustainable vessels are the ones that receive the least support. Small-scale fishers, who use low-impact techniques, operate within a system designed for large-scale industry:

- Obligation to carry out the first sale of their product through an auction market via a Dutch auction, where the price is set solely by the buyer (regardless of the cost incurred in catching the fish).
- Prohibition of direct sales, even to local restaurants that wish to buy from them.
- Absence of specific support and a dedicated regulatory framework, despite evidence of their low environmental impact.

This model rewards overexploitation and penalizes selectivity: large industrial fleets accumulate rights by fishing more, while small-scale fishers, who catch less and with lower impact, are relegated in the allocation process. According to the [European Fisheries Control Agency \(2024\)](#), 10% of the largest fishing companies concentrate 70% of fishing quotas in Spain, while artisanal vessels - more than 80% by number - have access to less than 6% of total quotas.

Marta Cavallé: *“It is the only sector where those who destroy the most obtain the most rights.”*

The outcome is twofold: on the one hand, the Mediterranean is today one of the most overexploited seas on the planet, with 87% of its fish stocks above the biologically sustainable limit, according to FAO–GFCM (2023). On the other hand, generational renewal has broken down: young people do not find economic stability or the necessary support to continue their parents’ occupation. Various studies by the [LIFE Platform](#) and the [FAO](#) warn of the growing precariousness of artisanal fishing in the Mediterranean, marked by unstable incomes, an ageing sector and the lack of generational renewal. The combination of resource overexploitation and the absence of institutional support threatens the continuity of traditional knowledge and the social fabric of coastal communities: the loss of the occupation is not only cultural, but the direct consequence of an economic model that renders the social value of low-impact fishers invisible.

In Europe, industrial fishing receives significant financial support through subsidies and fleet modernization measures, particularly for bottom trawl vessels. These subsidies can cover between 0.50 € and 0.75 € per kilogram of fish caught, while small-scale fleets using low-impact gear receive substantially less support or none at all. The aid allows for engine renewal, efficiency improvements and technological modernization. Although these improvements may reduce discards through more efficient selection, they also make it easier to maintain or increase fishing capacity, leading to larger catches and increased pressure on marine ecosystems.

In contrast, artisanal fleets, which operate using low-impact techniques, receive less economic support and face more administrative obstacles, limiting their ability to compete despite being more sustainable.

Sources:

- [ClientEarth, 2024 – Subsidies and Mediterranean fisheries](#)
- [FAO / GFCM – The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries, 2023](#)

FROM OVERFISHING TO RESILIENCE.

In Europe, there are already successful examples that commit to direct sales:

In France, Poiscaille, a cooperative platform of “seafood boxes”, distributes more than 20,000 weekly portions of artisanal fish with direct digital traceability from the port. In Italy, Pescatori a Miglio Zero connects artisanal fleets with urban consumers through food contracts and municipal agreements.

These initiatives eliminate intermediaries and seek to establish trust-based relationships by sharing common values, which allows them to set a fair and stable price for both sides.

Moreover, both models benefit from official recognition and logistical support from local authorities. Their existence demonstrates that direct sales are not only viable, but also strengthen the economic and environmental sustainability of coastal communities.

TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM OF CONSUMPTION.

At CoCo Sapiens, we seek to address consumers from a perspective of awareness and shared responsibility. But without forgetting that it is institutions, regulations and political decisions that determine how seafood products are fished, labelled and consumed. The future of the sea does not depend solely on fishers, but also on those who design the rules and on those who decide what to put on their plate.

For all these reasons, CoCo Sapiens calls for an urgent reform of regulations:

- Allow direct and traceable sales of low-impact artisanal fishing.
- Differentiate small-scale fishing gear from other fishing gear in labelling.
- Implement accessible digital and analogue traceability systems (such as QR codes).
- Promote the proper implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy.

CONCLUSION: A NEW BLUE CONTRACT.

“Saving artisanal fishing is not a matter of nostalgia, but of ecological and cultural survival.”
Joan Roca, chef of El Celler de Can Roca

Recovering artisanal fishing is not about looking to the past, but about imagining a future in which economy and ecology work together. It is not about rescuing a tradition, but about restoring balance.

This report does not seek to assign blame, but to identify structural problems and offer pathways for transformation, as well as to provide consumers with tools to make conscious decisions.

The transformation of the Spanish fisheries system does not require inventing new rules, but rather applying those that already exist. Both the Common Fisheries Policy - [Política Pesquera Común](#) the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 14 and 12) - [Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible](#) and - insist on promoting responsible consumption and protecting small-scale fisheries.

The FAO itself, in its *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines, 2015)*, recalls that “fair access to markets and the direct participation of fishers in the value chain are essential conditions for sustainability.”

Spain, as a Member State, has the necessary tools. What is lacking is political will and a structural review of the sales system that would finally allow a clear distinction to be made between artisanal fishing (small-scale fishing gear) and industrial fishing (trawling).

The sea cannot defend itself alone: it needs those who know it, love it and study it to speak with one voice. As **Marta Cavallé**, a member of LIFE, points out: *“We forget that every purchase can be an act of advocacy. If we choose low-impact fishing, we choose a sea with a future and vibrant local communities.”*



Content by CoCo Sapiens, coordinated by Xavier Sala with the collaboration of Cristina Savall, Maite Felices and Isaac Monclús.

CoCo Sapiens has been highlighted as a success case in the National Food Strategy - ENA of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food - [Estrategia Nacional de Alimentación - ENA](#) (Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación).

CoCo Sapiens is part of the European EIT Food network as a Community Partner, thereby becoming part of a community of global leaders in food innovation. EIT - European Institute of Innovation and Technology - [Instituto Europeo de Innovación y Tecnología](#).

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COCO SAPIENS Conscious Consumer Community
 Your Food Choices Shape the World
info@cocosapiens.org
www.cocosapiens.org