



# The emergence of artisanal fishing as a strategic response in the Chilean fishing field

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## ABSTRACT

The research explores the emergence of the “artisanal fishing” category in Chile as a strategic adaptation to the pressures of industrialization. Through a qualitative documental analysis, the study examines how this category became a vital mechanism for local fishers to defend their identity and secure their livelihoods against the expansion of industrial practices, particularly trawling. The findings show that the institutionalization of “artisanal fishing” not only shaped fisheries policy but also reinforced the socio-cultural integrity of fishing communities. This strategic framing enabled fishers to gain legal recognition and influence resource management decisions. The study underscores the critical role that such emergent social categories play in enabling marginalized groups to navigate power dynamics within policy environments, offering lessons for the ongoing adaptation of fisheries management frameworks to contemporary challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Fisheries are a space for social struggles [3]. Such struggles may be triggered by changes to the regulatory framework, external shocks or the entry of new actors into the social space [15]. The fishing field in Chile, particularly throughout the 20th century, evolved into a dynamic and contested social space where various actors, including artisanal fishers, industrial operators, and governance units, engaged in the social struggle for marine resources. The introduction of industrial fishing in the pelagic/demersal fishery –in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s [2, 28]– specifically with regard to the common hake (*Merluccius gayi gayi*) fishery, posed a significant challenge for local fishers of the central and south-central zone, who had traditionally operated in a less competitive and more community-oriented environment. Faced with the threat of modernization, these fishers developed the “artisanal fishing” category as a key strategy to redefine their position within the field, protect their livelihoods, and preserve their traditional practices. The present research examines the evolution of the “artisanal fishing” category in Chile as a strategic adaptation to industrialization, evaluating its implications for fisheries policy formulation and the socio-cultural identity of fishing communities.

The definition of this category has a direct impact on fisheries management and their vulnerabilities [21,22,25,27]. There is no single way of defining “artisanal fishing” and it has different levels [26], but more than a scientific use of the category, it may have a strategic sense from the actors themselves in the fishing field to seek more stable worlds with new cultural frames [4,14]. Understanding the origins and evolution of social categories like “artisanal fishing” is essential not only for grasping the historical dynamics of fisheries, but also for shaping public policies that recognize and respect the trajectories and experiences of coastal and fishing communities (see for example: [11]). This knowledge enables policymakers to design interventions that address current needs while honoring the survival strategies and adaptations these communities have developed over time [23]. In a global context where fishing communities face growing challenges from globalization, resource competition, and climate change, recognizing these trajectories is crucial for developing sustainable and equitable policies.

## 2. Methods and materials

The research explores the construction and formation of the “artisanal fishing” category and its policy effects on the fishing field. We

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systematically engaged with a broad spectrum of documentary sources (1930s to 1990s), including legal documents, historical memoirs, newspaper articles, government bulletins, academic documents, and fishers' licenses. The data, which primarily cover central and south-central Chile, were analyzed to uncover the historical and social processes underlying the consolidation of the "artisanal fishing" category in Chilean fisheries policy and culture.

Our methodological approach involved qualitative thematic/historical analysis, focusing on the historical evolution of fishing practices, the interaction among various social actors, and the impact of public policies on the formalization of artisanal fishing as a distinct category within the sector. Each documentary source was coded and categorized based on its origin, year publication, and content type, using specific codes (ADE, BAS, CHP, COR, DFL, DO, DRT, ETH, LAC, LEG, MAR, MER, MIA, MIJ, SAM, SUR and VIA) detailed in [Appendix A](#).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Crisis and emergence of artisanal fishing

The introduction of industrial fishing into the Chilean fisheries sector –especially seining and trawling in the demersal/pelagic fishery– was more than just a state-driven technological advancement (COR01; VIA02); it marked a significant upheaval in the social and economic fabric of coastal communities. Prior to the advent of industrial fishing, the fishers along the coast were known as "free fishers" or "professional fishers" before eventually being categorized as "artisanal" (DFL01; MIJ01; MAR04). Before the 1940s, they organized mainly to improve the productive and material conditions of their communities (hygiene, sports, security, education, professionalization) (ADE01; BAS01; VIA01). According to a historic union leader, the first unions in the 1920s and 1930s aimed to defend the rights of artisanal fishers to coastal areas (MAR03), address social issues such as welfare and health, and advocate for their recognition as independent workers [8].

In 1940, the Production Development Corporation (CORFO) – a government organization for economic development – organized a commission to study the effects of trawling. This initiative led to the acquisition of an otter trawler, "TITO," emblematic of industrial productivity, which began operating in the south-central zone (MAR04).

Subsequently, various industrial initiatives were launched at the national level (COR02; VIA03).<sup>3</sup> Between 90 % and 98 % of TITO's production was common hake (*Merluccius gayi gayi*), a species traditionally targeted by small-scale fishers in the central and south-central zones (MAR04, BAS01). Local fishers soon voiced their concerns about the competition, criticizing trawling and demanding the creation of an exclusive zone for artisanal fishing (MAR02; SUR01). Small-scale fishers, who had long relied on communal and more selective methods, suddenly faced competition from large-scale industrial operations. They perceived this as a major factor contributing to the depletion of fish stocks, linking it to the environmental impacts of these new practices (MAR02). This added a new layer of challenges for fishing communities already struggling with existing pressures (Fig. 1).

The initial response from fishers was one of organization and resistance. Fishers recognized that the industrial sector, with its significant resource extraction capabilities, posed a direct threat to their livelihoods (MAR02). Industrial fishing was perceived as an alien force, one that disregarded the local practices that had sustained coastal communities for generations. This perception catalyzed the formation of the "artisanal fishing" category, which was not only a way to distinguish their methods from industrial ones but also a means to assert their identity and claim their rights within a rapidly changing field (ADE02). This is expressed, for example, in the formalization of these fishers'

<sup>3</sup> In fact, on May 1, 1941, Compañía Pesquera Arauco (S.A., a subsidiary of CORFO), a historic industrial fishing company, began operations.

organizations, which are gradually beginning to take the name of artisanal fishers, and their members to be recognized as artisanal fishers (DRT03).

The emergence of "artisanal fishing" as a distinct category can be seen as a strategic response to the industrial sector's encroachment. By framing themselves as "artisanal," these fishers were able to articulate a narrative that emphasized sustainability, tradition, and community (SAM01). This narrative was crucial in rallying support from both within their communities and from external allies, including policymakers, members of parliament, and environmental advocates, who recognized the value of preserving these traditional practices, as in the case of the prohibition of (industrial) trawling in the bay and within three nautical miles of the coast in central-southern Chile (DO01; MAR02). In 1958, Parliament addressed conflicts between coastal (artisanal) and industrial fishers, noting that post-1945 techniques like trawling nets required legislation to protect marine resources and the livelihoods of artisanal fishers (LEG01).

#### 3.2. The role of governance and legal recognition

Initially, the category was used informally among fishers as a way to organize and distinguish themselves from the industrialization of fishing (ADE02). It is possible that the idea of "artisanal fishing" was influenced by the experiences of fishers who worked in Europe (MAR02). However, as the conflict between artisanal and industrial sectors intensified, this even led fishers from the central-southern zone to stone a trawler and to the insinuation of the use of firearms in order to defend their work (LEG01). It became clear that legal recognition was necessary to protect artisanal fishers' rights and ensure their survival. Subsequently, political authorities began to use this category in legislative discussions, prior to its formalization. In fact, before they were formally called "artisanal fishers", they were called "professional fishers" (Fig. 2).

The Chilean state's role in this process was ambivalent. On the one hand, the government's push for industrialization was driven by a desire to modernize the economy and increase productivity (COR01, MAR01). On the other hand, there was growing recognition that the unregulated expansion of industrial fishing was leading to overexploitation of marine resources and the displacement of traditional fishing communities (SUR02). Additionally, industrial fishing failed to address the issue of food provision and local consumption, which remained low despite the increase in industrial production (VIA04). This tension within the state's approach created space for artisanal fishers to push for legal recognition and workspace protection (LAC01) (Fig. 3).

The formal establishment of the National Federation of Fishers of Valparaíso (FENAPEVAL) in 1965, just months after the formation of a federation for industrial fishers (DRT01), marked a key turning point (DRT02). By 1969, this federation became the National Federation of Artisanal Fishers of Chile (FENAPARCH), where official records show the State first referring to these fishers as "artisanal" (DRT03). The creation of the "National Federation of Artisanal Fishers of Chile" (FENAPARCH, in Spanish acronym)<sup>4</sup> in 1965/9 was a critical milestone in this process (BAS04; LAC05); and the transition from the term "professional" to "artisanal" began to gain momentum around this time (CHP01). These organizations provided a platform for artisanal fishers to collectively advocate for their interests and negotiate with the state. Through sustained lobbying and strategic alliances with other social movements (such as the Workers' Federation of Chile, FOCH in Spanish acronym), the Federation was able to secure important concessions,

<sup>4</sup> It is suggested that the origin of the use of the adjective "artisanal" comes from the "Third National Fishers' Congress" (1940), during which the name of the "National Confederation of Fishers of Chile" was changed to FENAPARCH (ADE02). The fishers of the region of Valparaíso, in Caleta Portales (Valparaíso) are the ones that give rise to a federation that little by little begins to take the adjective "artisanal".



Fig. 1. Early Social Organization and Emerging Criticism of Industrial Trawling. a) Congress held in a fishing community (Portales cove, Valparaíso region, central Chile) between 28 April and 1 May 1938, where the main interest lies in the professionalization of fishing and material improvement of the coves (caletas in Spanish, [7]). Among the conclusions of this Congress was the need to form the National Confederation of Chilean Fishers and to bring together all the legally constituted artisanal fishers' union; b) Following the advent of industrial fishing, the Fishers' Congress in 1942 in southern Chile (Lota) saw the emergence of new concerns, including criticism of trawling practices. Source: a) MER01; b) SUR01.

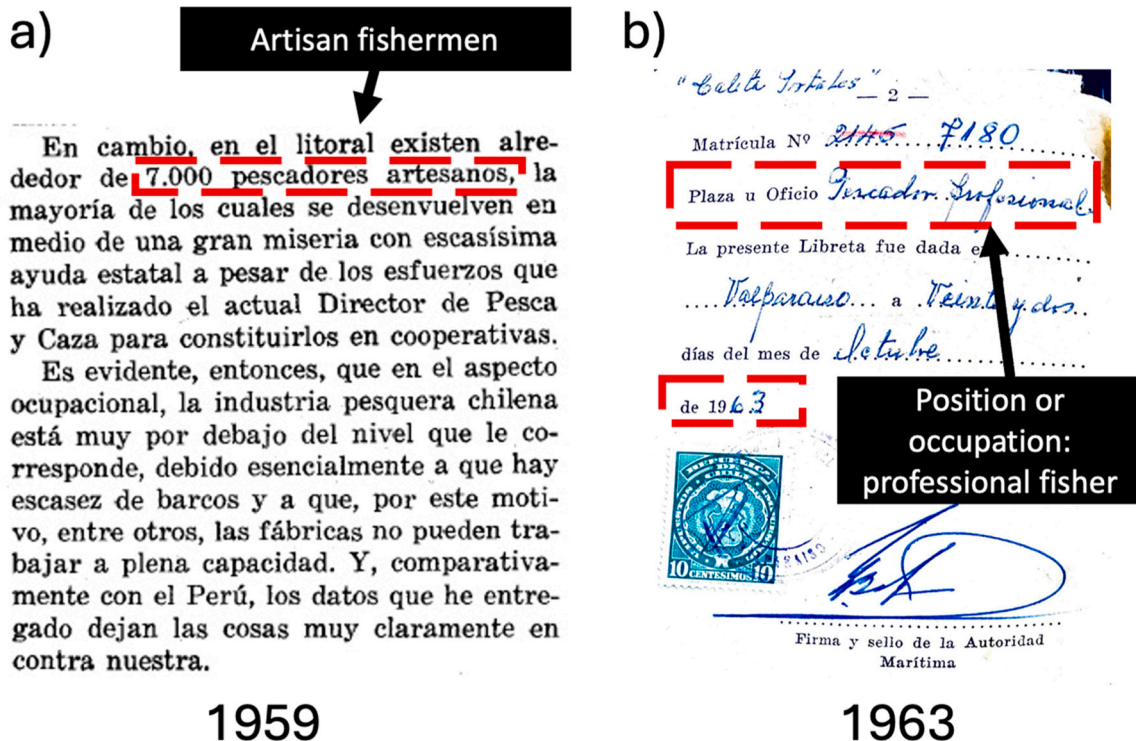


Fig. 2. Early Legislative Mentions of “Artisan” Fisherman vs. Formal Use of “Professional Fisher” in Licenses. a) Extract from a legislative discussion (in 1959) in which the concept of “artisan fishermen” was used by a political authority, even though there was no formal category; b) Fisher’s license (from 1963) shows that the name assigned was “professional fisher” and not “artisanal”. The state and other actors did not recognize/formalize the category of “artisanal fisher” instantly despite the informal use by themselves. Source: a) LEG02, b) ETH01.





Fig. 4. The effectiveness of the category and collective action of “artisanal” fishers. Three thousand artisanal fishers clash with police forces in a protest against trawling fishing. Many people were injured in the confrontation that culminated in a burning boat entering the Congress. Source: MER02.

further enrich the understanding of the evolution of artisanal fishing. Future research could benefit from integrating contemporary or past event narratives for a deeper analysis of dynamics in the fishing field.

## 5. Conclusion

The emergence of artisanal fishing as a strategic category in Chile responded to the crises caused by industrial fishing. This category helped artisanal fishers safeguard their livelihoods, influence fisheries policies, and institutionalize their traditional practices. By building a collective identity based on sustainability and community, they have remained resilient amid modernization and globalization. This research underscores the importance of social and cultural dynamics in fisheries management, highlighting how social categories protect the rights and resources of local communities.

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Miroslav Pulgar:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Constantino Villarroel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106514](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106514).

## Data Availability

The data used are detailed in Appendix A.

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## Glossary

- Caleta Portales (Portales cove)*: traditional fishing cove, well-known artisanal fishing community in central Chile (Valparaíso).
- CONAPACH*: Consejo Nacional de Pescadores Artesanales de Chile that later changed its name to Confederación Nacional de Pescadores Artesanales de Chile (with the same acronym in Spanish). It is an important confederation of artisanal fishers that was born in the 1980s as an effort to improve the living conditions of fishermen in the fishing field.
- CORFO*: Corporación de Fomento de la Producción. Created in 1939, during the presidency of Pedro Aguirre Cerda, with the purpose of promoting the industrialization of the country.
- FENAPEVAL*: Federación Nacional de Pescadores Artesanales de Valparaíso, was a social organization of Chilean artisanal fishers in central Chile. Later called FENAPARCH (see below).
- FENAPARCH*: Federación Nacional de Pescadores Artesanales de Chile, was a social organization of Chilean artisanal fishers in the mid-60s and early-70s.
- FOCH*: Federación Obrera de Chile, Chilean union organization in the early 20th century.
- Merino Law*: It is the law that anticipated the LGPA (see below) and took place in the first discussions in 1989, its name comes from Admiral José Toribio Merino who actively participated in the civil-military dictatorship.
- LGPA*: Ley General de Pesca y Acuicultura (General Law on Fisheries and Aquaculture), was the first major fisheries and aquaculture regulation of 1992.
- SUBPESCA*: Subsecretaría de Pesca y Acuicultura (Undersecretary of Fisheries). Responsible for regulating and managing fisheries and aquaculture through policies and regulations,