

ONE HOOK, ONE LINE, ONE FISH AT A TIME

By Emilia Dyer

“One hook, one line, one fish at a time” creates environmental, social and economic benefits which ripple throughout our oceans and the coastal communities connected to them. This article by the International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF) relates the stories of a few one-by-one fishers in Cape Verde, Azores, and the Canary Islands, but they could just as well represent millions of small-scale fishers and fish workers in other parts of the world whose lives and livelihoods are entwined with the ocean. The International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYFA 2022) is a timely reminder that the efforts of these men and women must be recognized and supported.



Credit: Pepe Brix

Canary Islands

One-by-one fishing lies at the heart of many coastal communities around the world. For many, this way of fishing has become an integral part of their culture. Each is distinctly unique, from the dramatic islands of the Azores to the ancient fishing villages of Indonesia, and from the busy coasts of Brazil to the abundant seas of South Africa. These regions are often characterized by their remoteness, challenging topography and economic dependence on this age-old method of fishing which unites them as communities and bonds them with the ocean.

Such localized, small-scale fishing not only brings communities together in culture, it provides for their daily meals and it can lift them from poverty, empowering them to take on commercial opportunities. Just one man on his boat, catching tuna- one hook, one line, one fish at a time-creates environmental, social and economic benefits which ripple throughout our oceans and the coastal communities connected to them.

The International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF) is a charity that represents these small-scale one-by-one tuna fisheries while simultaneously pushing the industry to focus more on sustainability. Our vision for the future is a world with

thriving fisheries that work in balance with nature by catching one fish at a time. This is why we work, both directly on the ground with local coastal communities and with decision-makers such as RFMOs, local governments and other NGOs. We recognize the importance of championing and promoting local, traditional methods of fishing as they currently fight for their place in the supply chain against industrial bodies. We believe that these communities hold the answer to the future of our oceans as we move away from overfishing towards a more holistic approach to sustainability in which we take social and economic elements into account for driving change as a responsible approach.



Credit: Pepe Brix

A fisher in Azores

Livelihoods through one-by-one fishing

People lie at the heart of what we do and we'd like to tell their stories. We created "Tuna Tales- In Balance With Nature", a documentary series for the Tuna Tales Project which unites the stories of one-by-one fishing communities around the world. It spans from the immense beauty to the harsh challenges of this way of life. One-by-one provides opportunities to those who would have otherwise been limited, like Susana Sousa, who's able to have her freedom and put her daughter through university.

Our oceans are at risk as a result of decades of industrial overfishing which is driving down fish stocks, decimating

biodiversity and overwhelming our oceans with pollution. The impacts of these destructive fishing activities is putting the future of people's livelihoods and families, like Alfredo Durao's, at risk and is being felt, increasingly, among the day-to-day lives of artisanal fishers like Jesus Machín.

Susana Sousa, São Jorge Island, Azores

Artisanal fisheries create 90% of jobs in the fisheries sector. One-by-one fisheries, like these in the Azores, provide these opportunities to a far greater number of people for each tonne of tuna they harvest. That is why the one-by-one fishery is so important for São Jorge island, not only for the fishers and the dock workers, but for the women who are offered opportunities to create their financial independence in the Santa Catarina Factory. Together they form a cohesive coastal community. People like Susana Sousa, for whom the one-by-one fishery provides her with a job, an income, and her freedom. "When we have our jobs, we have our salaries, and we have our freedom. We don't depend on anyone."



Susana Sousa

Nestled in the hills of São Jorge, Azores, the Santa Catarina Tuna Canning Factory employs over 120 women to process, can and distribute locally caught one-by-one tuna. There are about 120 women here, like Susana Sousa. Before working at Santa Catarina Canning Factory, Susana's job prospects were incredibly limited, but since she started working here, her life has changed a lot. Because of her job, Susana now has her own house and has been able to send her daughter to university. These are essential steps for women in remote communities to provide income and more diverse opportunities. All of this was possible because of her salary from the factory.

The factory provides free health checks for all employees, as well as annual health and safety training (including personal health); and in an effort to help alleviate some of the financial costs associated with employment, the company arranges transport services to and from the factory for all employees.



Santa Catarina factory, Azores

Even more fundamental than a salary, jobs like these offer Susana, and thousands of women like her, freedom. When they have their own income, they don't have to depend on anyone else, they are free to make their own way. "Since I started working here my life has changed a lot. I have a house and a daughter in University. All because of this salary."

Jesus Machín, El Hierro, Canary Islands

Surrounded by beautiful lunar landscapes, La restinga is a small village on the south coast of El Hierro island in the Canaries. In recent decades, Jesus Machín, a 42-year-old fisherman, and the rest of the people in this small fishing community, have witnessed the revolution of the fast-growing large industrial fishing fleet. This boom brought the pressure of industrial fishing into the shallow waters around the island.

Jesus knows he's highly dependent on these waters; he contemplates the ocean with his feet grounded on the island. The ocean surface seems to be endless, and the longevity of its species, eternal. But in fact, he knows small continental shelves around the Canary Islands make their marine ecosystem even more vulnerable and limit the available fishing grounds. He is aware of their success in one-by-one fishing tuna around the island but also knows that it is highly dependent on healthy, abundant fish stocks. Overfishing these waters could drive them into a disaster. "An artisanal boat that fishes one-by-one would never put the resource at risk. On the other hand, a boat with a purse seine net that is two kilometres long and hundreds of metres deep, will definitely cause damage."

Although the concept of marine protected areas is something that is instinctively put in the hands of politicians, 26 years ago, a group of fishers from this village resolved not to wait for the goodwill of those in command. They decided to create

their own marine protected area to assure the good health of the fish stocks they rely on to survive.



Handline fishers

The “Mar de las calmas” marine protected area was born and is, even now, the most important sanctuary of life that assures a better future to the island fisheries. The actions of these fishers have become an example for the Canary Islands archipelago, for Macaronesia and for all Europe.

“A protected area that supported the interests of our fisheries was created and we’ve seen that it has been a great success. Not only for fisheries. In this village there was only one diving centre and now there are almost ten”, said Jesus.



The Mar de las calmas protected area

The sustainable, localised nature of one-by-one fishing offers an improved future to coastal communities who have often been left with little option and by using their collective voices. Communities like the fishers of El Hierro have secured that for themselves; however in other regions, the impacts of overfishing are still deeply impacting the present and future lives of the community.

Alfredo Durão, Monte Trigo, Cape Verde

At the base of the 1 979-metre high Topo de Coroa volcano lies a magical place called Monte Trigo. There are no roads in or out and no harbour. Water, medicine, rice, gas- everything you can imagine - is brought to the community by fishing boats which land on the beach with the breaking waves, right next to the football ground. Fishing is not only the most important economic activity for Monte Trigo’s people, it’s also the structure that assures that all necessary goods are brought to the community.



Fishing village, Cape Verde

Alfredo Durão is the captain of the fishermen association’s boat which employs most of the fishers at Monte Trigo. They know that by working together, things are made easier. “The ocean is everything to us. Because here we are fully dependent on it.”

Times are changing and to be a fisher requires more and more perseverance. Not too long ago, they could use their small boats to catch tuna right there in the bay where risks were low. Nowadays, with the industrial fleet putting pressure on the surrounding waters, Alfredo and his crew, as well as all the other fishers from Monte Trigo, are forced to go out far to the northwest banks, more than 18 miles away from the shore, and risk their lives to catch tuna to make sure they continue to be able to provide for their families.

Despite the community coming together to buy more suitable boats, it still has its limitations and as time goes by, these limitations are becoming more and more evident. After a 7-hour trip to the northwest fishing ground, they still have to catch enough tuna, one-by-one with their bare hands, to feed their families. At this point, the island is just a shadowy shape

on the horizon and the boats, here and there, disappear in between the mountainous waves.

“A long time ago fishermen used to be able to catch tuna right here in the bay. Now we have to go much further to the far northwest banks to fill our boats, because of the purse seiners that catch all the tuna before they get to our coastal waters”. Overfishing and harmful fishing practices by industrial fleets is pushing communities like those in Monte Trigo to the brink of their survival. They are being forced to compete beyond their capabilities in a system which often fails to recognise their rights and needs. If we continue on this path what does that mean for their futures? And their families’ futures?

“I have my family but If I can’t provide for them in future then who is going to look after them? Who is going to care for them? No one.”



Handline fisher, Cape Verde



Beaching the boat, Cape Verde



Women on the beach, Cape Verde



Beaching the boat, Cape Verde

It’s vital that we preserve this ecosystem so that the wildlife and people around the world can continue to thrive for future generations. It is no secret that our ocean’s health is in serious danger; we understand the gravity of climate change, we are aware of the effects of overpopulation on the planet, and, needless to say, most recently as the global pandemic unfolds, studies gradually start to show the effects on our physical and mental health. The ocean’s health concerns us all and we, therefore, share the power and responsibility to change this.

Now is the time to turn things around: to invest in fishing communities, safeguard their livelihoods and protect our environment. Effective policy changes are urgently needed across the world’s oceans to prevent environmental and social collapse in these vulnerable regions. By understanding the people and lives behind these fishing methods we can better support them and transform our system to meet their needs and the needs of our ocean. Transform our world to one in balance with nature. 🌍



Emilia Dyer is Communications Officer with the International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF). She is a Marine Biologist who recently graduated from the University of Exeter which sparked her curiosity for ecology and the drivers of change in the ocean, with a deeper interest in how we positively manage the ocean in a time of such rapid change. She supports the IPNLF Marketing and Communications Team work streams and continues to write for her blog www.ecology-matters.org.