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Ethnogeographic approach to artisanal fishing in the Río Negro – Uruguay

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ABSTRACT

Ethnogeography is a field of study that examines how human cultures interact with their geographic environments, analyzing the perceptions, uses, and meanings people attribute to a particular territory. This approach is applied to the study of artisanal fishing in the Río Negro, Uruguay, highlighting the social construction of the territory and the importance of local knowledge in the relationships between communities and the environment. The research draws on ethnogeographic fieldwork, analysis of local narratives, and historical investigation to examine the territorialities of artisanal fishing groups. The findings are organized into four dimensions: family and personal, socioeconomic and cultural, environmental and resource management, and the future of fishing. Results reveal that artisanal fishing is a family legacy central to the identity of fishers, despite persistent challenges such as environmental degradation, declining income, and the difficulty of transmitting knowledge to younger generations. Fishing communities demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability, continually seeking to achieve sustainability and protection of the ecosystems on which their lives and culture depend.

KEYWORDS: ethnogeography; territorialities; artisanal fishing.

INTRODUCTION

The limited research on the ethnogeography of artisanal fishing motivates this study of fishers along the Río Negro in Uruguay. Analyses of fishing have generally focused on biological or economic aspects, neglecting cultural dimensions and local perceptions of territory. This work addresses that gap by examining how fishing communities socially construct their territories and how ancestral knowledge informs both their practices and their relationship with the environment.

The study's relevance lies in its potential to provide a more integrated understanding of the territorial dynamics of artisanal fishing. An ethnogeographic lens reveals the complexity of community–environment interactions, highlighting local knowledge essential for sustainable resource management and ecosystem conservation. At the same time, recognizing these territorialities allows for more inclusive and context-sensitive policies that support community well-being and safeguard cultural heritage (Berkes & Turner, 2005). Against a backdrop of mounting environmental pressures and socio-economic change, this investigation contributes to the sustainability of artisanal fishing and the future of communities dependent on it.

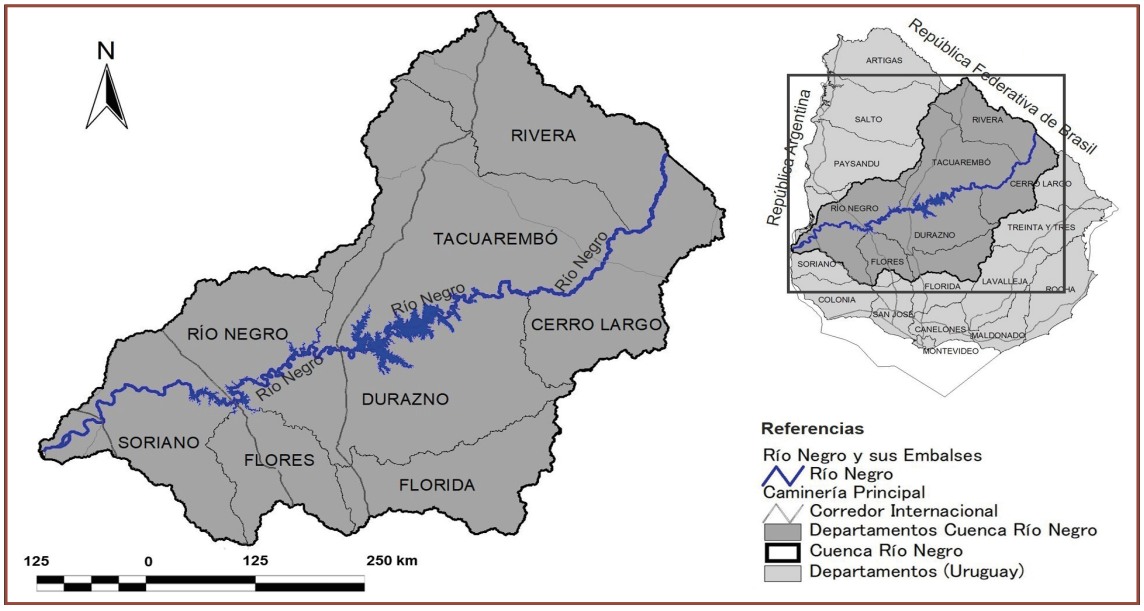
Territory here is understood not only as physical space but also as a social construction shaped by practices and meanings (Lefebvre, 1974). In the Río Negro, this means examining how fishers give form and significance to their living and working environments through their activities and environmental knowledge. The study highlights the potential of ethnogeography to connect territory and territorialities within the society–space relationship, employing a theoretical and methodological framework to understand artisanal fishing territories and their practical applications.

Claval (2002) points out that a scientific geography based only on theories can forget "everyday geographies". Spatial projection emerges through "geographical consciousness" (Tuan, 1985), "personal geographies" (Lowenthal, 1985), and "vernacular geographies" (Claval, 2002). Fully grasping geography requires engagement with these lived realities, born from the intersection of empirical and geographical knowledge (Claval, 2011). Analyses of territory must also move beyond a narrow political conception of power to account for its operation at multiple scales (Raffestin, 1980). Critical geography reframes territory as the social use of space through appropriation and labor (Zaragocin-Carvajal, 2018). Fishing societies thus appropriate aquatic spaces with both work and knowledge, valuing territory for its social

uses (Cardoso, 2003) and recognizing it as a social, symbolic, and political construction (Raffestin, 1980).

Claval (2014) defines ethnogeography as the study of a group's geographical beliefs (whether cultural, class-based, or professional), with each group producing its own distinct interpretation. Sauer (2000) underscores the importance of toponymy as retrospective knowledge of past conditions and as a "particular substrate of learning" that helps identify variations in phenomena and alternative cultural perspectives, bringing us closer to affective relationships with the land. Claval (2014) further stresses the need for scientific geography to adapt to new social realities by considering diverse voices and local knowledge, integrating community participation in knowledge production, and, through an interdisciplinary perspective, addressing geographic problems holistically while reinterpreting vernacular geographies.

Figure 1 – Location of the Río Negro Basin



Source: Authors' elaboration (2025), based on DINACEA, Ministry of Environment of Uruguay.

This study combines a territorial geographic approach with ethnogeography and historical inquiry, employing interdependent methodological strategies, including engagement with informants, participatory cartography, interviews, participatory mapping, participant observation, mental maps, and river-based fieldwork. It uses the ethnogeographic perspective to deepen understanding of the complex interplay between culture and the territorial configurations of artisanal fishers on the Río Negro (Figure 1). By engaging with the theoretical pillars of ethnogeography and its main contributors, the study identifies the discipline's key contributions while organizing methodological

tools for investigating the culture–territory nexus. Applying these research techniques to the territorialities of the Río Negro seeks to reveal the richness and complexity of the dynamics that shape the interactions between human communities and their environment in this specific setting.

TERRITORY AND TERRITORIALITIES: AN ETHNOGEOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Territory is not merely a geographical space but a social and political construct in constant transformation. Territorialities represent the diverse ways in which actors organize and exert control over territory (Raffestin, 1980). For Vasconcelos (2024), territories are built and dismantled across spatial and temporal scales within fields of power that are geographically bounded. Territory must therefore be analyzed within the historical and geographical contexts in which it emerges, serving both as a nexus of global networks and as a local refuge and resource base (Haesbaert, 2007).

As Raffestin (1980) and Haesbaert (2013) argue, territories and territorialities emerge from multiscalar and multidimensional power relations—symmetric, asymmetric, or disymmetric—where social, political, economic, and cultural aspects intersect and intertwine. These processes highlight not only the social construction of territory but also its negotiated and contested character.

Raffestin et al. (2013) define territorialities as the practices and strategies through which social actors occupy, control, and use territory. This encompasses both physical appropriation and symbolic affirmation. They identify three main types: 1. Strong territoriality—complete control and domination of territory by one group or actor, where norms and practices are imposed on others. This type of territoriality implies a relationship of power and control over the territory. 2. Weak territoriality—characterized by negotiation and influence among multiple actors, a more flexible and less dominant arrangement marked by coexistence and interaction of practices and knowledge. 3. Null territoriality—situations where actors lack control or influence over a territory, often constrained by political, economic, or social factors (Raffestin et al., 2013). Quaresma de Paula (2021) adds that territorialities manifest through knowledge of space and resource access, correlating environmental conditions with both traditional and technical needs. In traditional communities, knowing where resources are and how to extract them constitutes a form of power. Territory is thus perceived as a web of social relations, where actors cultivate a sense of belonging tied to collective action, appropriation,

and identity, creating bonds of solidarity (Brunet, 1990). This perspective enables us to examine how territorial dynamics in traditional societies differ from those in modern ones, particularly in terms of knowledge and practices. For Raffestin and Bresso (1982), in traditional societies, knowledge and practice fuse in everyday life. These practices, rooted in popular knowledge (Leff, 2010), shape environmental management and territorial governance.

Fishing, as a way of life, intersects with other societal processes of production and reproduction of territory. It is shaped not only by urbanization and industrialization but also by environmental degradation tied to hegemonic production models (Cardoso, 2003). As such, artisanal fishers face a broad field of conflicts, and as their movement becomes politicized, they engage in debates over their livelihood, working conditions, geographical space, and territory.

Haesbaert's (1997) "culturalist" approach emphasizes symbolic boundaries within territorial limits, where identities are forged through local historical and cultural relations. Local culture emerges in small, bounded spaces where common symbols anchor specific forms of representation (Featherstone, 1993). Albagli (2004) stresses that belonging and ways of acting within a geographical space constitute a form of territoriality, where locality and social relations intersect, reinforcing identity. Local knowledge, practical expertise, and the capacity of actors to foster endogenous development from this sense of territoriality comprise what Ostrom (1995) identifies as the cultural and social capital of a given territory.

From a territory-based ethnogeographic perspective, Staszak (1996) notes that ethnogeography faces hurdles because it is recent and underdeveloped—an observation that also fits the ethnosciences more broadly, whose methods still lack certainty. He identifies three questions: one of content (what kinds of studies are feasible?), one of method (how should we conduct them?), and one of epistemology (what scientific legitimacy can this field claim?). With similar concerns, Claval (1999) argues that many ethnogeographic studies lack coherence and therefore calls for first delimiting a clear research domain and only then interpreting collected data. He asks what ethnogeography ought to explore: representations of the world, relations with the environment, the human being, and social life. Claval (1999) also explains why geographers should engage in fieldwork: the world we study is shaped by human actions and marked by their knowledge, desires, and aspirations; curiosity makes this inquiry both productive and essential for understanding our surroundings. For Claval (1999), if ethnogeography is

to exist, we must define and practice it intentionally, base it in geography—its objects, methods, and concepts—and focus on the study of territorial representations. Recognizing ethnogeography as a discipline for territorial studies then requires considering the range of concepts and techniques various authors have proposed over time.

Harvey (1969) argues that ethnogeographic analysis must register how economic, political, and social factors shape space, tracking the ways power relations and social dynamics structure the production and appropriation of places. Sack (1986) advances an approach centered on how sociocultural groups perceive and represent geographic space, analyzing narratives and symbolic place representations to examine how communities construct identity through space.

As for research techniques, ethnographic fieldwork remains central, involving immersion in the study area through participant observation and interviews with local community members, with an emphasis on direct experience and interaction (Marcus, 1995). The toolkit also includes archival work and the review of historical and cartographic documents to reconstruct spatial histories and transformations, along with critical readings of maps to reveal how geographic knowledge is constructed (Cosgrove, 1998).

Bandieri (2017) proposes an interdisciplinary framework that pairs ethnography with critical geography to analyze socio-spatial practices, highlighting the ties among space, culture, and social inequalities. Methodologically, he recommends combining qualitative and quantitative procedures—such as participant observation, interviews, and analyses of spatial and statistical data—to capture both the subjective and symbolic dimensions of socio-spatial practice and the objective features of space.

Methodological approaches with an ethnogeographic lens in the Río Negro territory

The territories of the Río Negro embody the diversity and complexity of relations within a heterogeneous sociocultural mosaic. From their formation onward, they have been shaped by artisanal fishing communities, areneros, and family farmers, among other social actors, whose interplay gives this territory its distinctive character (Childe Pereira et al., 2020; Pereira, 2021). Many of these complexities surface in the ongoing construction and reconstruction of community cultural identity—most notably among artisanal fishers, their territory, and their way of life (Corrêa Euzebio, 2024).

Given this diversity, territorial approaches are built upon the analysis of cultural dynamics that interact and weave an internal web of relations, producing distinct territories.

To define ethnogeographic approaches and methods in the Río Negro, we first characterize the territorial construction and dynamics shaped by artisanal fishing groups and examine their relationships with natural resources amidst recent socio-environmental changes. Ethnogeographic methods in this context go beyond simple description to engage in research with the subjects being studied. From this perspective, ethnographic techniques directly address the research questions.

The identification of artisanal fishing communities and their territories started with a qualified informant who mapped existing communities and their distribution. Taylor and Bogdan (1987) remind us that, from an ethnogeographic perspective, the researcher does more than just collect information: they learn from others' experiences and viewpoints, value processes, and develop theory from informants' perspectives—hence the importance of a skilled key informant who is embedded in the field and helps select and identify actors in this territory.

Throughout the process, the aim is to build trust—what Taylor et. al (1987) call "rapport." Although difficult to define, rapport denotes a relationship that enables informants to open up and share their inner feelings beyond their public façade. Two elements are essential to establish it: savoir-être and common sense.

Other methods stem from that initial interaction. At this stage, we create hand-drawn participatory maps with key informants. Following Cooke (2003), these basic cartographies are "memory maps" of the territory that show, in the informant's judgment and knowledge, the main features, their size, and their location. Using these tools helps clarify how artisanal fishers are distributed along the Río Negro and how territorial patterns emerge from fishing practices.

To characterize the environmental aspects of these territories—especially their cultural layer—we conduct interviews. Besides benefiting from the researcher's presence, interviews create space for the freedom and spontaneity that enhance inquiry (Triviños, 1987). They are essential for understanding the meanings embedded in local perceptions and realities—how interviewees interpret their lives, experiences, knowledge of natural resources, and achievements, in their own words (Macedo, 2010). Interview guides focus on the sociocultural aspects of respondents, their current knowledge

and use of Río Negro resources, the dynamics of that knowledge and use, and the continuities and changes in community knowledge and practices.

To complement the interviews, we employ Participatory Mapping. Following Chambers (1994), this method gathers interpretations of territorial spatial arrangements and cultural aspects of the subjects. Our aim is to capture Río Negro artisanal fishers' life experiences—how they value natural elements like landforms, flora, and fauna— and to identify intangible features such as festivals and gatherings that are characteristic of these territories and valued by fishers (Chambers, 1994; Faria & Ferreira Neto, 2006).

These methods enable communities to express, value, share, and analyze their lived knowledge, thereby creating conditions for planning and acting in their spaces and territories. We trace Río Negro fishers' relations with natural goods and with other actors and determine where conflicts and synergies arise between artisanal fishing groups and the broader set of social actors in the territory.

With an ethnogeographic lens, we employ participant observation to integrate everyday life into the analysis, establish fewer formal relationships with actors, and elicit the essences and meanings that comprise their lived territories, cultural landscapes, and the reality of Río Negro artisanal fishers. As Becker (1994) notes, this method requires the researcher's sustained presence in the community to generate information and to grasp both the situations people face and how they respond.

Following Brandão (1987), the inquiry becomes participatory and considers the person involved as a "living subject"—a partner in the research process. The researcher must reflect on the stance of the study and their own identity, and view and understand social classes, their subjects, and their realities through identified individuals and through the social–political work inherent to class—the purpose of both practice and research.

We complement mapping and observation with mental maps. The ethnomap method (Futemma & Seixas, 2008) encourages community members to depict, graphically, the spaces they occupy and the surrounding natural resources. It constructs, based on community perception, their social representations and spatial images of lived places, highlighting how they think about, organize, and visualize knowledge of the territory and their own identity. Fishers thus depict how they view the ecosystem, the natural goods and resources they know and use, and the localities that support fishing or other extractive practices (Anjos, 2009).

As an input to the ethnomaps, we conduct transect walks ("travesías–recorridos"): joint outings with researchers and key informants to explore landscapes and gather their explanations (Chambers, 1994; Chambers & Guijt, 1995). Along the Río Negro artisanal fishing territories, we identify and interpret fishers' knowledge of environmental systems, natural resources, and fishing practices, as well as the socio-environmental stressors that threaten artisanal fishing.

According to Claval (1999), the goal of these ethnogeographic approaches and methods is to understand from residents' perspectives. We therefore rely on flexible, open, dialogic tools—ethnomethodologies—and on fieldwork as a moment of dialogue and participation where subjects show and narrate how they perceive the world around them, along with their beliefs and traditions (Almeida, 2008; Claval, 1999). In this way, ethnogeographic methods operate in territory not only through the convictions, values, and aspirations embedded in space, but also through how individuals perceive the world and relate socially.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Río Negro is a complex territory (Childe Pereira et al., 2020; Childe Pereira, 2021), woven from sociocultural relations in which artisanal fishing communities play a central role. The ethnogeographic framework foregrounds the historical and cultural dimensions in the creation of these spaces, demonstrating how local practices and knowledge have shaped the landscape and social dynamics over time. Grounded in direct engagement with local actors, the fieldwork combined in-depth interviews with artisanal fishers and visits to fishing camps to understand identity and lifeways.

We examined how fishers actively construct territorial reality: everyday practices sustain livelihoods while reaffirming belonging and ties to the riverine environment. Ethnogeographic methods enabled us to work in situ, integrating convictions, values, and aspirations as expressed in space and in fishers' own territorial perceptions and social relations. Overall, we conducted 17 interviews with artisanal fishers and spent 10 days in the field within fishing communities.

We synthesize the results into four key dimensions (Table 1) that provide a comprehensive view of Río Negro's artisanal fishing communities. We enhance the analysis by comparing and complementing the data through the ethnogeographic methods described, demonstrating not only our findings but also how direct engagement with territorial actors revealed these complex dynamics.

Table 1 – Analytical dimensions, categories, and description

Dimension	Category	Synthesized Description
I. Family & Personal	Trajectory – Roles – Conditions & Culture	Artisanal fishing is a family inheritance that shapes identity, grounded in deep knowledge of the river and transmitted across generations. The lack of generational replacement threatens this cultural and social pillar.
II. Socioeconomic & Cultural	Socioeconomic Context – Market & Culture	The decline in catches harms the local economy, fostering feelings of injustice and cultural abandonment due to reliance on intermediaries and weak official support.
III. Environmental & Resource Management	Ecological Knowledge – Change – Management – Impact & Ecosystem	Fishers—drawing on extensive experience and river knowledge—perceive severe environmental degradation from pollution, invasive species, and climate change. They criticize the ineffectiveness of closed seasons and official management.
IV. Future of Fishing	Transmission – Sustainability – Challenges & Evolution	The future of fishing is at risk because younger generations show limited interest and knowledge transfer is needed. Resource protection is essential amid economic pressures, exploitation, and scant support, though fishers demonstrate adaptability.

Source: Authors' elaboration (2025), based on empirical results and the application of ethnogeographic methods.

Artisanal fishing on the Río Negro is a vital part of community identity, even as it faces serious social, economic, and environmental challenges. Using strong local knowledge and resilience, fishers work to promote sustainability and protect an ecosystem that supports their way of life and culture.

The approach from an ethnogeographic perspective has enabled us to understand that the territory is not only a physical space, but also a set of socio-cultural interrelationships where fishing defines life and identity. An ethnogeographic lens shows that territory is not merely physical space but a web of sociocultural relations in which fishing structures life and identity. Using qualitative methods—interviews, participatory cartography, participant observation, mental mapping, transects, and visits to fishing camps—we sought to read territorial dynamics through fishers' own perspectives, building trust and co-producing knowledge.

From the territorial configuration of Río Negro's artisanal fishers, we identified four major analytical dimensions, grouped into categories summarized in Table 1.

Findings highlight a family and personal dimension in which fishing passes across generations, forging identities rooted in the river and in deep, tradi-

tional environmental knowledge. At the same time, waning interest among younger cohorts threatens the continuity of this knowledge.

Fishers' life trajectories highlight that fishing is not just an economic activity but an inheritance and a vital source of identity (Soto Correa, 2023). Interviews and participant observation—especially life-history work—demonstrate how experiential, river-based knowledge becomes a pillar of their existence.

Family and gender roles show artisanal fishing as family labor, with responsibilities, knowledge, and tasks shared and passed down through generations (Figure 2). Interviews with fishers and their families, along with direct observations in camps, confirm women's key participation—a vital support that helps sustain the activity over time.

Figure 2 – Artisanal fishing activities

Source: authors' elaboration (2025), based on fieldwork photographs.

The images depict intergenerational practices and family participation in artisanal fishing. Numbered activities include: (1) fish filleting; (2–3) net mending; (4) rowing by hand; (5) checking nets and removing fish on the river; (6) family presence.

In the socio-economic and cultural sphere, declining catches significantly reduce income and viability, fueling feelings of injustice and neglect amid limited public support. Commercialization occurs through intermediaries and direct sales of value-added products (Figure 3). In the latter, women play a

vital role throughout the entire value chain (Pensado & Gutiérrez, 2022). Artisanal fishing remains a key part of the local economy, but large industries like UPM (a pulp mill on the Río Negro) influence consumption patterns and, in turn, the fishery's local economy.

Figure 3 – Value-added fish products

Source: authors' elaboration (2025), based on exchanges with women fishers.

Processing by women fishers increases product value and expands access to more market segments.

Figure 4 – Agribusiness activities in the artisanal-fishing territory

Source: authors' elaboration (2025), fieldwork photographs

The environmental and resource-management dimension reveals a deep understanding of traditional ecological knowledge. Fishers directly observe river degradation: fewer fish, more invasive species, agrochemical contamination, algal blooms, and effects of climate change. They criticize ineffective seasonal closures and the environmental impacts of agriculture and forestry plantations (soy, eucalyptus) on water quality and biodiversity (Figure 4). They see the aquatic ecosystem as an interconnected whole; species reproduction and biodiversity are vital, and environmental changes directly decrease catch availability. In this context, Fals Borda (2002) notes that fishing depends on

climatic and territorial factors. A strong conclusion from fishers' accounts is the direct link between declining catches and environmental decline.

Fishers describe recent conflicts and changes, especially the expansion of forestry and soy, which cause land-use shifts and environmental issues like thick green algal scums that block fish presence.

Finally, the "future of fishing" dimension shows genuine concern about passing on ancestral knowledge and maintaining the activity. Fishers suggest conservation measures, pursue adaptation, and explore economic alternatives. Despite low profitability, overexploitation, and limited government support, they show remarkable adaptability and resilience.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Articulating territory and environment with the population (the collective subjects present in the place), society, and culture is crucial—and it involves establishing connections with artisanal fishers and their interactions with the environment and nature.

Understanding space through territory as a social construct involves incorporating historical, cultural, productive, and environmental factors. Martínez Alier (2021) argues that ecological conflicts are also disputes over social distribution, highlighting the importance of integrating social and environmental perspectives lenses. This approach enables the identification of impacts on natural resources associated with regional productive activities and the assessment of their status, promoting conservation. This includes co-produced diagnostics with local communities to identify actions that minimize environmental harm.

Work with artisanal fishers on the Río Negro (Uruguay) shows that biophysical issues—such as river nutrient pollution from plantations and industry, altered flows and ecosystems, dam impacts, droughts, forestry, and biodiversity loss—are deeply connected to other dimensions, requiring a comprehensive approach to address the social, cultural, and economic factors related to this community (Cavalcante Corrêa et al., 2020). An ethnogeographic perspective proved essential for grasping and analyzing these connections, helping to improve coordination across the dimensions that influence fishers' lives and work, as discussed by Claval (2011) and Brandão (2007) in their studies of cultural geography and the production of space.

Triangulating qualitative information collected through various ethnogeographic methods created a detailed picture of territorial layout, complex relationships with natural resources, and the sociocultural dynamics

that shape artisanal fishers' lives on the Río Negro. The findings demonstrate how identity, livelihood, and culture are deeply connected to river health and the ongoing practice and knowledge of local communities. Emphasizing fishers' voices highlights their traditional knowledge for identifying problems and their role not only as affected parties but also as protectors of a threatened natural–cultural heritage and territorial stewards. As Toledo & Barrera-Bassols (2008) point out, recognizing local and popular knowledge is vital for its long-term sustainability.

Critically assessing the ethnogeographic methodologies used is therefore key. We weighed the strengths and limits of each approach for this specific context. Techniques such as artisanal participatory cartography, interviews, and participatory mapping provided valuable insights into territorial perception, local knowledge, and sociocultural dynamics. At the same time, map accuracy can be constrained by individual memory; interviews can reflect subjectivity; and participatory maps require careful interpretation.

Similarly, participant observation, mental maps, and traverses offered valuable insights into daily life, ecosystem understanding, and environmental knowledge. However, the researcher's presence can influence behavior; interpreting mental maps can be challenging; and traverse-based data might be limited to the areas visited. Carefully combining these methods—and considering their strengths and weaknesses—provides a more comprehensive and accurate view of the complex relationships between fishing communities and their territories.

Such a strategic approach aims to enhance the management of natural resources, with a special focus on sustainable fisheries and the communities that shape territorial boundaries. Through their connection to the land and water, artisanal fishers support local economies and help protect inland water resources. Even so, protective measures are necessary: secure resource access, legal recognition, and territorial rights for fishing communities.

Public policy must account for these interlinked dimensions and adopt a participatory approach that places artisanal fishers at the center. This entails providing economic support, integrating traditional knowledge into conservation strategies, promoting fair and sustainable value chains, and ensuring the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Ignoring these complexities threatens not only the subsistence and lifeways of these groups, but also an irreplaceable cultural and ecological heritage of immense value. ●

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Rodrigo Childe Pereira: contributed to the comprehensive literature review, the conceptualization of the study, the methodological design, the analysis and discussion of the results, and the writing of the sections in general.

Marcel Achkar: contributed to the literature review, general review of the writing, structuring of the article, and systematization of the information.

Cesar de David: contributed to the systematization of information, the literature review, and highlighting the importance of research.

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