



Solutions

For a sustainable and desirable future

Published on *Solutions* (<http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com>)

[Home](#) > Sustainable Fisheries Are Community-Led

Sustainable Fisheries Are Community-Led

Jul 21, 2011

The collapse of fisheries worldwide endangers the livelihoods and food security of tens of millions of people. These fisheries are often small and ill-suited to top-down regulatory intervention. In many cases, a “tragedy of the commons” scenario—in which each individual fisherman seeks only to maximize his own catch—leads to overfishing and collapse. But a recent article in *Nature* describes a different, far more promising trend. It analyzes the surprisingly successful preservation of small fisheries through devolved systems of comanagement. As Ray Hilborn, professor at the University of Washington and one of the article’s coauthors puts it, the report’s findings “[illustrate] the world’s growing ability to manage fisheries sustainably ... in small-scale fisheries or countries without strong central governments.”

The project followed 130 comanaged fisheries in 44 developed and developing countries across a range of ecosystems, fishing styles, and targeted species. Across the sample, a pattern emerged: for a fishery to survive, there needed to be strong community leadership. “Community leaders weren’t just important,” said lead author Nicolás Gutiérrez, “they were by far the most important attribute present in successful co-managed fisheries.” Interestingly, these community leaders do not themselves need to be fishermen.

Southern California’s sea urchin fishery is a good example. Urchin fishing in the 1970s was unregulated and lucrative enough to draw people from their stable full-time careers; by the 1990s the urchin population had been reduced by 75 percent and showed no sign of leveling off. State licensing restrictions did nothing to stave off collapse, and it was only when the community of fishermen agreed among themselves on the necessity for moderation that the urchin population began its recovery. Today, under the same communal leadership, the urchin fishery of San Diego is one of the world’s most sustainable.

And what is one of the least important attributes for successfully comanaged fisheries? The support of local authorities and government officials. Though surprising, this is also reassuring: according to Gutiérrez, “the majority of the world’s fisheries are not—and never will be—managed by strong centralized governments with top-down rules and the means to enforce them.”

The work detailed in this article builds on the foundational insights of Elinor Ostrom, winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in economics, who has made a career of studying the characteristics of what she terms “long-enduring systems.” Commenting on Gutiérrez’s publication, Ostrom says that “it was very exciting to see the findings about trust, communication, commitment, and respect for leaders being the most important attributes leading to successful fisheries co-management.” Gutiérrez’s work lends credence to the opinion that an industry built on trust and cooperation can succeed alongside—and can, in fact, outperform—an industry built on competition.

At least 211 comanaged fisheries exist worldwide, from the billion-dollar Bering Sea pollack industry to local and artisanal groups like Chilean abalone harvesters. This *Nature* study suggests that the expansion of comanaged fisheries would be good for the oceans and fishermen alike. “Additional resources should be spent on efforts to identify community leaders and build social capital rather than only imposing management tactics without user involvement,” notes Gutiérrez.

Source URL: <http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/958>