

# New, but Long Overdue

Small-scale fishers in Europe have established a low-impact fishing platform to further fishing in a sustainable and socially and economically viable manner

Launched in November 2012 at the First Artisanal Fishers' Congress in Santiago, Spain, formally registered in the United Kingdom in 2014, and with an office established in Brussels in 2015, the Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE) is a relatively new, but long-overdue platform.

The First European Artisanal Fishers' Congress that launched LIFE, gathered over 50 fishers' representatives from nine European countries. They agreed to a common declaration that defined 'low-impact fishers' as those fishers who:

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- use low-impact gear in terms of selectivity and impact on marine habitats,
- work on their own vessels,
- are committed to ensuring the sustainability of their activities by respecting the rules or, where such rules are absent or insufficient, by applying self-imposed measures to protect the fisheries resources and the environment, and
- maintain a strong social, cultural and economic link with their communities.

Fishers engaging in destructive fishing methods that exert a harmful impact on the environment, are non-selective or catch undersized fish will not be represented by LIFE. These methods will be decided on a Member State basis. Fishers' organizations

wanting to join LIFE are required to sign up to the common declaration and comply with the above definition. Interestingly, the reformed Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) of the European Union (EU) defines 'low-impact fishing' as "utilizing selective fishing techniques which have a low detrimental impact on marine ecosystems or which may result in low fuel emissions, or both". LIFE was established as a single, strong and inclusive voice to represent the interests of small-scale low-impact fishers, both men and women, across Europe. Historically, such a voice has been noticeably absent at the European level. LIFE's mission is to achieve conditions in which fishing is performed in a sustainable manner and small-scale low-impact fishers in Europe can maximise optimal conditions for their social and economic viability.

LIFE enables European small-scale low-impact fishers to develop and communicate collective positions and to influence the development and implementation of policies and legislation, including the CFP. LIFE acts as a platform for, and promotes, the creation of regional and national low-impact fishing organizations in EU Member States where representation is lacking. LIFE advocates for the right to fish to be granted those who fish sustainably, fleet overcapacity to be reduced where it exists, while preserving jobs in artisanal, low-impact fisheries, harmful subsidies and unsustainable and destructive practices to be stopped, and the health of our seas in Europe and the rest of the world to be restored.

One of the main campaigns of LIFE is to push for the implementation

of Article 17 of the recently reformed CFP. In particular, Article 17 of the CFP obliges Member States of the EU to use transparent and objective criteria, including those of an environmental, social and economic nature, when allocating the fishing opportunities available to them. The criteria to be used may include the impact of fishing on the environment, the history of compliance, the contribution to the local economy, and historic catch levels. Article 17 also encourages Member States to provide incentives to fishing vessels deploying selective fishing gear or using fishing techniques with reduced environmental impacts, such as reduced energy consumption or habitat damage.

As we will see below, Article 17 was incorporated into the CFP thanks to the concerted demands made by small-scale fishers during the reform of the CFP. One European Commission Official has described its provisions as ‘potentially revolutionary’. LIFE Members currently include fishers’ organisations from Poland, Germany, UK, Ireland, France, Netherlands, Greece and Spain, with applications being processed from organisations in Croatia, Italy, Portugal, Sweden and Denmark. All in all, around seventeen national-level organizations are associated with LIFE, representing around 3,000 fishers.

Until the recent review and reform of the CFP—a process that started in 2009 and ended in 2014 with the launch of the new CFP—it could be argued that the EU had no policy for small-scale fisheries. The CFP gave Member States the option of using the 12-mile zone to provide priority access to small-scale fishers to inshore waters. With few exceptions, small-scale fisheries was treated as a national issue, with little relevance at the EU level. Therefore, any small-scale fisher or group of small-scale fishers seeking redress at the European level had to make their voices heard through structures that had been, in the main, set up to service the interests and needs of larger-scale fishing companies and fishery-sector workers employed by such

companies. These include the producer organizations (POs), set up by the EU as a means to distribute quotas and the vessel owners’ associations set up to engage with policymakers on fishery-management issues.

Small-scale fishers have been noticeably absent from the European consultative forums where policy matters are discussed with various interest groups, including vessel owners, retailers, consumers, NGOs and trade unions. Those representing the larger-scale fishery interests in these forums were at pains to point out that they represent all the fisheries-sector interests—whether large or small. However, issues discussed in these forums and decisions taken at the EU level as a result were rarely transmitted to small-scale fishers, who did not have the possibility of airing their views and concerns beforehand.

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Small-scale low-impact fishers in Poland use fixed nets and lines. Small-scale fishers have been noticeably absent from the European consultative forums

All that changed, when in 2009, in its consultation document, the Green Paper on the Reform of the CFP, the European Commission posed the question as to whether a differentiated management regime for large-scale and small-scale fisheries would be appropriate. Such a regime would protect the most fragile coastal communities from the cuts in fishing capacity that were required to bring fleets and resources into line. Due to the desired cuts in fleet size, the European Commission had envisaged that employment in the fish-catching sector would decline by 60 per cent over 10 years, with the heaviest losses falling on the artisanal sector, which employs around 50 per cent of the fisheries workforce and constitutes 80 per cent of the fleet in terms of vessel numbers. Whilst it was expected that the large-scale fleet would be economically self-reliant, it was proposed that public funding could be used to help the small-scale segment adapt to changing conditions in the wake of the CFP reform, thereby strengthening its economic viability, and helping in maintaining its contribution to the life of coastal communities. Many Member States felt that it was up to them to decide how small-scale fisheries were managed in their countries' waters, and what measures should be applied to them.

During the review of the CFP, a group of dissatisfied but highly motivated small-scale fishers from Sweden, Denmark, France, UK, Ireland, Spain, Greece and the Netherlands, representing small-scale fishers from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, formed an informal platform to lobby for small-scale fisheries to be given special consideration under the reformed CFP. They felt that they had been unfairly treated by previous policies, which had overlooked their rights when allocating access to fisheries resources, providing access to markets, and to opportunities to develop their enterprises. In particular, many held legitimate grievances that they had been excluded from the quota system, and, as a result, their access rights to their traditional resources were being denied them. They argued

that a significant proportion of the European fleet is small in scale and fishes in a non-intensive manner, using a range of seasonally diverse fishing methods on a range of species, with a relatively low impact on the ecosystem. However, the particular advantages of these characteristics—the qualitative aspects of different fishing gear and practices—had been largely overlooked by the CFP. They, therefore, proposed that this should be rectified by providing priority access to fishery resources to those who fish in the most environmentally and socially sustainable way. This demand became incorporated into the CFP under Article 17, as described above.

In the new CFP, the rights of small-scale fishers—defined as those using vessels under 12 m and non-towed gears—to participate in formal consultation processes in the (Regional) Advisory Councils (ACs) are backed by special provisions. These reserve seats especially for small-scale fishers, and make finance available to compensate for the loss of earnings of genuine fishers who attend these meetings. Today, LIFE is working to establish a presence in four main sea basins—the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Bay of Biscay and the Mediterranean. It is LIFE's objective to assure the participation of its members in the ACs in these regions where fisheries interest groups come together to discuss issues of common concern, and to propose actions. Since August 2015, LIFE has organized three regional workshops in Poland for the Baltic region, in Spain for the Atlantic regions, and in Greece for the Mediterranean region. These meetings have gathered around 110 fishers from thirteen countries, who have reiterated their commitment to LIFE and to seeing its aims and objectives realized. 

For more 

[lifeplatform.eu/](http://lifeplatform.eu/)

**The Low-Impact Fishers of Europe**