



SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES BETWEEN THE SEA IN LOBITOS

Lobitos, a small coastal community in Northern Peru, is certainly not a sleepy town. Every year it receives a flock of surf enthusiasts, drawn by the great waves. Small-scale fishing boats provide a beautiful backdrop that they and other tourists enjoy. But that is not the only thing that can be seen from shore. Further away are the oil platforms – several of them. It is easy to see how fisheries and tourism go hand in hand. What about oil?

The book, *“Lobitos: Between Sea and Oil”*, tells the story of this small-scale fishing community, whose livelihoods, health, and futures were put at risk by the December 2024 oil spill that contaminated their coast, disrupted fisheries and tourism, and revealed the deep social and environmental impacts of oil extraction on coastal communities. Through the lens of Lobitos, the book offers reflection and lessons about what it means for a small community to stand up to the oil giant. It reveals how fishing is not only an economic activity, but also a source of food, culture, memory, knowledge, and collective life, while highlighting the injustices the community faces, from environmental degradation and economic uncertainty to limited political recognition.

FISHERIES

Fishing has been a mainstay of life along the Lobitos coast for centuries. In fact, it dates back to pre-Inca and prehispanic times. In the past, fishermen used the wind to navigate the rich waters around Lobitos. Since the 20th century, outboard motors and nylon fishing gears have been used by the small-scale fishing fleet to outfit their wooden vessels. However, sailing is still used to save fuel when wind conditions are favourable. In 2024, they are around 40 fishing vessels, going fishing six days a week and providing the local market and hospitality sector with fresh and high quality fish products. Some on-foot fishermen collect goose-neck barnacles and octopus from the nearby beaches. Small-scale fisheries contributes not only to employment and sources of income, it is important for securing local food and nutrition, maintaining the maritime culture and identity and for the perpetuation of local knowledge and a sense of community life in this place.

SURFING

Lobitos is internationally recognized for its long, powerful waves, which attract surfers from Peru and around the world. Over recent decades, surfing has become an important part of community life and the local economy. Surf schools, photographers, guides, accommodation providers, restaurants, and other small businesses earn income from visiting surfers. Local organizations also use surfing to create educational opportunities for children and young people, cultivating confidence, leadership, well-being, and meaningful relationships with the sea. During the December 2024 oil spill, local surfers documented and shared evidence of the contamination, and during the storm surge they jumped with their surfboards to help fishers in an effort to prevent their boats from sinking. Surfers in Lobitos play a role in defending coastal health and calling for accountability. Today, surfing continues to connect younger's livelihoods, recreation, education, and collective care for the coast.

THE MANY SIDES OF LOBITOS

TOURISM

Tourism has become an important source of employment and income in Lobitos, supported by the community's renowned waves, beaches, coastal biodiversity, distinctive desert landscape, fishing culture, and industrial heritage. Visitors contribute to hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, transportation services, surf schools, local shops, and other small enterprises. Tourism also creates opportunities to share Lobitos's history, traditional knowledge, food, and relationships with the sea. Its long-term value depends on healthy coastal ecosystems and meaningful community participation in decisions about how the destination develops. The December 2024 oil spill disrupted tourism, prevented people from safely enjoying the beach, and damaged Lobitos' image as a destination. This experience highlighted the close relationship between environmental health and the local economy. Community-led tourism can generate livelihoods, celebrate local culture, and support collective care for the coast while ensuring that its benefits remain within Lobitos.

OIL

Oil extraction has shaped the territory, history, and identity of Lobitos since the early twentieth century. Foreign and national oil companies have transformed the landscape through wells, pipelines, industrial facilities, workers' housing, and other infrastructure. The industry generated employment and influenced social organization, while leaving lasting environmental risks and a complex industrial legacy. Oil operations have continued alongside fishing, surfing, tourism, and everyday community life. In December 2024, an oil spill contaminated the Lobitos coast, disrupted fishing and tourism, affected local incomes, and raised concerns about human and environmental health. The spill revealed the vulnerability of coastal communities living near extractive infrastructure and strengthened local demands for transparency, restoration, compensation, and greater accountability from companies and public institutions. Lobitos's experience illustrates the need for energy development that respects community rights, livelihoods, and strong relationships with the sea.

LOBITOS TIMELINE SINCE OIL SPILL 2024

DEC 21, 2024: SPOTTING THE SPILL

Fishers discover a black sheen of oil covering the shoreline. The spill has reached Las Capullanas, a cultural heritage site and it is placing marine life, fishing livelihoods, tourism, and community health at risk.

DEC 27, 2024: STORM SURGES & COMMUNITY RESCUE

The community starts negotiations with Petroperú but a powerful storm surge creates another emergency. Half of the fishing boats sink within half an hour. Local surfers enter the water to help rescue boats, motors, nets and people's livelihoods.

MARCH 2025: STRATEGIC PLANNING

Community members and project collaborators review the evidence, stories, photographs, and historical materials for developing the e-book. This book will support community memory, environmental monitoring, advocacy, and locally grounded visions for the future.

AUG 2026: UNITING FOR LOBITOS

The youth-led e-book about Lobitos is a unique collective action, showcasing the strength of coming together to honour the past, deal with the current situation, and plan for what's next.

DEC 22, 2024: EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Petroperú's estimate fails to reflect the full scale of the spill. Young local residents are hired to help clean the affected beaches for less than US\$20 per day, reportedly without sufficient protective equipment or adequate information about the health risks. The contamination and clean-up process generates deep concern and outrage throughout the community.

FEB 20, 2025: BLUE JUSTICE ALERT WEBINAR

Tulio, Ivan & Emi tell the story about the oil spill at TBTI Webinar during the commemoration of World Day of Social Justice. While the emotions are still raw, their determination to change, and make a difference for Lobitos, was strong and captivating.

JULY 25-27, 2025: COLLECTIVE ACTION AFTER 2ND OIL SPILL

After an oil pipeline burst on land, the community mobilizes again gathering outside oil facilities access points and preventing Petroperú operations. They demand an adequate response. After two days and the arrival of the police, Petroperú agrees to provide higher compensation than had initially been proposed.

Moving with Caution

>>>> The community-led effort to deal with the oil spill and to rebuild the fisheries is not to be taken for granted. Key elements like leadership building, democratic participation, and social capital, among others, need to be supported and nurtured. Collective actions and community-based solutions are imperative but not sufficient. The December 2024 incident is not the first spill and it will not be the last one. Oil development may come and go, but the people are there to stay. That is why they matter more.



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Small-Scale Fisheries are Too Big To Ignore



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