

# UMIGYO IN SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES IN JAPAN: HOW PROTECTING LIFE ABOVE WATER LEADS TO PROTECTING LIFE BELOW WATER

By Yinji Li

***Although it has received a lot of attention in recent years, the topic of fisheries sustainability isn't new. Despite years of research, it is still difficult to achieve sustainability in many fisheries, and the discussions seem never-ending; but for the future of our planet, it is imperative that we change our food production systems. There is a growing interest in small-scale fisheries and recognition of how crucial they are to the development of sustainable fishery systems. One of the most intriguing and possibly among the best replicable models could lie in Japan's small-scale fisheries and their unique "Umigyo" way to protect life below the water by protecting life above water.***



Credit: Yinji Li

About 50 years ago, the phrase “small is beautiful” was very much in vogue. What it emphasised was the importance of a human-centred economy rather than the expansion of industrial society (Schumacher, 1973<sup>1</sup>). In the agricultural studies of the past decades, small-scale farming has been attracting attention as a countermeasure against large-scale industrialisation. Similarly, there is growing interest in small-scale fisheries in the fishing industry because they have the potential to sustain local communities and use natural resources sustainably.

As represented by the Too Big To Ignore Global Partnership Project (TBTI)<sup>2</sup>, small-scale fisheries are generally centred around family businesses that have a strong position in local communities and use fishing practices that have remained practically unchanged throughout centuries. This is not romanticising ‘small’; It merely emphasises the ability of local people and communities, who traditionally have lived with natural resources such as fish and the sea, and who have the deepest relationship with those resources, in protecting life below the water.

## Japanese-style management

The Japanese fisheries governance system is globally recognised as having long valued ‘small’. Since the Edo (or Tokugawa) Period stretching from 1603 to 1867, there has been a rule governing the use of resources called “*Iso Wa Jitsuki, Oki Wa Iriai*”, meaning that the coast or inshore areas should be used and managed by local communities, while the offshore area is open or communal access (Li and Namikawa 2020<sup>3</sup>). These customary fishing rules have been passed down from the 17th century to the present day, protecting the resources and fish-eating culture along the Japanese coast. This type of ‘Japanese-style management’ system has been attracting attention from around the world.

However, three years ago, the revision of the Fisheries Act introduced the keywords “growth industry”, which has enabled private capital to enter the coastal fishing industry. As a result, there is concern, and rightly so, that something “beautiful” will be lost. The time has come to seriously rethink the meaning of small-scale fisheries.

<sup>2</sup> <http://toobigtoignore.net/>

<sup>3</sup> Li Y, Namikawa T (2020) *In the era of big change: essays about Japanese small-scale fisheries*. TBTI Global Publication Series, St. John's, Canada

<sup>1</sup> Schumacher, E.F. (1973) *Small Is Beautiful*

## Tenacity in a harsh environment

Japanese small-scale fisheries play an important role in ensuring socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable fisheries. However, they face various challenges, such as the unpredictable household income from fishing, an ageing population, the shortage of people to lead the industry, the lack of successors, and the loss of regional vitality.

In order to protect their livelihood without giving up even in these difficult circumstances, various efforts to revitalise fishing villages are being developed along Japan's coastline. That means fisheries are not just a profit-generating system, but a way of life and gives purpose in the lives of small-scale fishers. In addition to reaffirming the crucial role of small-scale fisheries, it is important to improve the income of fishers and provide security for fishery workers by supporting the revitalisation activities in which small-scale fishers are the main players in various ways. In other words: it is essential to enable viable fisheries.



Credit: Yinji Li

## International recognition of small-scale fisheries

As large-scale and commercial fisheries spread around the world, small-scale fisheries centred on family businesses have been under pressure. Therefore in 2017, the 72nd General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA 2022), with the FAO serving as the lead agency, in collaboration with other relevant organisations and bodies of the UN system. IYAFA 2022 provided an opportunity to recognise the importance of artisanal fisheries and aquaculture in contributing to sustainable development and to promote solutions to the challenges faced by these fisheries. Other initiatives like the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 also highlighted the role that artisanal fisheries can play in ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all, shifting to sustainable consumption patterns, boosting nature-positive production, advancing equitable livelihoods and building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress.

## Life above and below water

Small-scale fisheries account for about 50% of the world's wild-caught seafood but employ more than 90% of the people working in the seafood industry. In Japan, 80% of fishers are engaged in coastal fisheries, and 90% of fishing entities are family operations, but the number of fishers has decreased significantly over the last years.

"The future of fishing is in artisanal and without large fleets," stated world-renowned scientist, Daniel Poly<sup>4</sup>. Sven Jentoft<sup>5</sup>, also a prominent sociologist of fisheries, said in his book 'Life Above Water (2019)', that it is essential to protect small-scale fisheries and fishing villages.

All of them strongly express the role and significance of small-scale fisheries, which have the ability to be fully sustainable and are capable of preserving ecosystems, because they value their resources. More important to remember is that preserving the pride and happiness of the people involved in small-scale fisheries, while passing on their history and traditional culture and sustaining local communities, cannot always be expressed in a spreadsheet or on graphs. Their significance is truly great.

## A history of injustice and inequality

The stakes have never been higher for small-scale fisheries. Often ignored due to their small(er) scale, small-scale fisheries have always faced many challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, lack of access to resources, gender inequality, and unequal allocation of resources.

In recent years, economic initiatives such as "Blue Economy" and "Blue Growth", have taken the lead in industry and ironically, small-scale fisheries are increasingly exposed to the threat of annihilation. One example is the Japanese Fisheries Act that underwent a major revision, with the key word being "growth industry." Updated policies, such as allowing private capital to enter coastal fisheries, have given rise to a range of concerns about the sustainability of small-scale fisheries under new legislation that emphasises economic efficiency.

Because small-scale fisheries have been consistently marginalised and persecuted relative to their importance, the concept of "Blue Justice" has been advocated as a counter-concept and we see this concept rapidly spreading (Li, 2022<sup>6</sup>). That the United Nations dedicated the whole of 2022 to artisanal fisheries and aquaculture (IYAFA 2022) is reflective

<sup>4</sup> Costa Rica News November 14, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Jentoft, S (2019) *Life Above Water*. TBTI Global Publication Series, St. John's

<sup>6</sup> Li, Y. (2022). Adopting a Blue Justice Lens for Japanese Small-Scale Fisheries: Important Insights from the Case of the Inatori Kinme Fishery. In: Jentoft, S., Chuenpagdee, R., Bugeja Said, A., Isaacs, M. (eds) *Blue Justice*. MARE Publication Series, vol 26. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89624-9\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89624-9_15)

of the fact that small-scale fisheries, which play an important role in maintaining sustainable fisheries, are in such a critical situation.



Credit: IPNLF

## The watchword for small-scale fisheries protection - Too Big To Ignore

Researchers, who have pointed out the current situation of small-scale fisheries at various conferences and policy forums, launched a project called the TBTI (Too Big To Ignore) Global Partnership in 2012. In Japan, the TBTI Japan Research Network was launched in 2020, focusing not only on research, but also bringing together researchers, government officials, practitioners, fishery officials, and community groups to participate in creating standpoints, based on local knowledge and facts.

Every four years, TBTI organises a large multidisciplinary forum called the World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress (WSFC). This is a conference where anyone who works with, or is interested in small-scale fisheries, can participate. The overarching goal of the WSFC is to bring everyone together to share information on all aspects of small-scale fisheries and develop action plans and capacity-building programs to support the implementation of FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines). For example, the 4th World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress Asia Pacific which was held in Shizuoka in 2022, brought together 250 delegates from over 30 countries with its main theme "Building Forward Better."

Because we are in a period of significant changes in policies regarding marine resources and environmental protection, Japan must reaffirm the importance of small-scale fisheries and fully implement the SSF Guidelines.

Small-scale fisheries are not only 'too big to ignore', their policy failures are irreversibly costly to the environment,

natural resources, and providing food security to the world. When you put seafood on your table, please think about the small-scale fishers around the world making strenuous efforts to provide it to you.

## Umigyo: from vulnerability to viability

The term "*Umigyo*" refers to a variety of values as well as resources for the revitalisation of regions and fisheries, including the culture associated with fishing and the landscape of fishing villages. Recently, this maritime term has been frequently heard from governments and the private sector. However, there is a concern that it will be perceived as nothing more than "marine business" in comparison to the initial "economic activities led by fishers and community people." Rather, it means more than just economic development.

### The social significance of Umigyo

There are various examples of *Umigyo*, including direct seafood sales, marine leisure and tourism, maritime culture, and hands-on learning. These not only provide new opportunities and livelihoods for those involved in the fishing industry, but also provide a social contribution and fulfil a social responsibility relevant to small-scale fisheries and coastal communities in order to contribute to the prosperity of the entire nation.

Based on this, *Umigyo* is defined as "a series of economic activities carried out by community people, centred on fishers and fishers' organisations, for answering diverse needs on marine and coastal use today, utilising not only fishery resources but also various local resources such as the sea, landscapes, traditions, and cultures (Lou 2013<sup>7</sup>)."

On the other hand, the idea proposed by the Japanese Fisheries Agency in 2022 was that it is "a business that utilises the value and charm of local resources such as the sea and fishing villages, and by responding to various domestic and overseas needs, it is expected to generate income and employment."

The definition of "who uses what" and "who does what" needs to be clarified. The Fisheries Agency's proposal, however, is ambiguous regarding the "who", which clearly differs from the earlier understanding. If only economic development proceeds while the actor is ambiguous, there is a concern that the entry of private capital will result in development without fishers.

<sup>7</sup> Lou X (2013) *The era of Umigyo: challenges towards the activation of fishing communities*. Rural Culture Association Japan, Tokyo [In Japanese]

## Protecting marine resources and fishing communities

Japan's small-scale fisheries clearly have an important role to play and they provide a good example of how sustainability can be achieved in fisheries. However, to this day, small-scale fisheries still face various challenges, such as the ageing population, lack of successors and workers, instability of fishing household income, and declining regional vitality.

In addition to these issues, there have been recent calls for Blue Economy and Blue Growth initiatives, and policies such as "turning fishing communities into theme parks" have been launched both in Japan and overseas to encourage private capital to enter coastal fisheries and fishing communities. The danger here is that fishers can get left behind.



Credit: Yinji Li

*Umigyo* is an effective and indispensable means of responding to these longstanding unresolved matters as well as new issues that are emerging. What makes this possible is the deep philosophy and science that "*Umigyo* is not just a business related to the sea."

In order to protect the life below water (marine resources), it is essential to protect the people, communities, and societies (life above water) that are closely related to them. The *Umigyo* is a way to protect life below the water by protecting life above water, and it can be said that it is a strategy that enables Japan to fulfill its responsibilities as an advanced country to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the marine and fisheries industries.

## Reviving fisheries is a national challenge

Future development of diverse *Umigyo* in many fishing communities will require the protection of independent rights like fishers' management of sea and coastal resources, and local resource management; as well as the participation of people from various fields both inside and outside the region. It is necessary to encourage cooperation with the fishing communities and to determine a proper *Umigyo* approach, which takes into account the unique circumstances of the communities and areas where fishing is practised.

Smaller fishing communities may be less familiar with the *Umigyo* concept and do not have the ability to collect information, so there is a possibility that they will be left behind in the development process. However, these same communities are the ones which need more awareness regarding *Umigyo*, and in order to avoid leaving them behind, we must also consider what form the government support and research promotion should take.



Credit: Yinji Li

As a researcher of small-scale fisheries and fishing communities, I have great expectations for the *Umigyo* concept, but I am keenly aware of my own responsibility at the same time, to promote it. It is hoped that consumers will pay close attention to the development of *Umigyo* as a topic that affects all citizens, and actively communicate what they want to see in terms of fisheries, marine resources, and the way of existence of fishing communities.🌐

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