

From Sea to Market: The Fishing Industry in Huatulco

By Randy Jackson

There is one foundational pillar of the economic prosperity of the Huatulco area on which everything rests: the sea. Its beauty, vastness, and potential for recreation are the central reasons for virtually all development here. Yet beneath its glittering surface, the sea is a living, breathing ecosystem – a source of sustenance, inspiration, and balance that has shaped the lives and cultures of people here for millennia. Among its many gifts, the fishing industry stands as both a testament to the sea's generosity and a reminder of the delicate relationship between human activity and the natural world. A kind of reverence for the sea lies in seeking a deeper understanding of its ecosystem. To that end, I offer some information about the local features of this portion of the Pacific and the fishing industry that depends upon it.

Local Ocean Features

The continental shelf off the coast of Huatulco is relatively narrow, especially when compared to the much broader fishing grounds found further north. It extends about 5 to 10 nautical miles (9 to 18 kilometers) from the shore, whereas the shelf near Mazatlán can stretch as far as 80 to 100 kilometers. The steep drop-off at the edge of the shelf facilitates “upwelling,” a process where deeper, nutrient-rich waters rise to the surface, fostering abundant marine life. This abundance attracts larger fish, which feed on smaller species and create opportunities for local fishermen. The proximity of deep waters to the coast further benefits local fishermen, granting them easier access to rich fishing grounds.

Seasonal ocean currents significantly influence fishing near Huatulco. The Costa Rica Coastal Current, most active from November to May, brings nutrient-rich waters that enhance fish abundance during fishing seasons. In contrast, the North Equatorial Countercurrent introduces warmer, nutrient-poor waters from June to October, shifting species availability and fishing patterns. Other currents, while less direct, can also impact local conditions. Additionally, large-scale climate phenomena like El Niño, which warms ocean waters, and La Niña, which cools them, further amplify variability, adding unpredictability to fishing conditions for local fishermen.

Puerto Ángel is the primary fishing port in the region. Located approximately 60 km (37 miles) west of Huatulco, it lies near the western boundary of the Gulf of Tehuantepec. This area marks a transition between the open Pacific coast of Oaxaca and the waters of the Gulf of Tehuantepec. The convergence of these two ocean ecosystems fosters rich biodiversity and supports highly productive fishing grounds.



Fishing Regulations

Mexico's fishing industry is federally regulated. CONAPESCA (*Comisión Nacional de Acuacultura y Pesca*) is the agency responsible for licensing, regulating, monitoring, and promoting aquaculture and the fishing industry. Overall, there are two general categories of fishing licenses: large and small vessels. Small vessels (less than 10 meters) dominate the local fishing industry near Huatulco. Although there are regulations that cover the smaller boats, there is virtually no enforcement of any regulations for these vessels on the Oaxacan Coast. CONAPESCA has one inspector to cover the contiguous coasts of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, a shoreline of about 1,400 kilometers. There is closer monitoring of the larger fishing vessels. However, only a small number of these vessels operate in Oaxacan waters, primarily commercial shrimp and shark boats operating out of Salina Cruz.

I could not determine the number of small fishing vessels operating in the Huatulco area. CONAPESCA reported 2,097 licensed smaller boats on the Oaxacan coast in 2023. However, there are significant numbers of unlicensed vessels, and subsistence fishing is allowed without a license. It is safe to say that most smaller vessels (pangas) fishing off the coast of Huatulco and more broadly in Oaxaca are not licensed and do not report their catch.

The Huatulco Fish Market

There is no central market for fish in Huatulco. Instead, small independent fishermen from various locations along the coast sell their catch directly or through intermediaries. Local buyers include small stores that sell both local and imported fish and seafood, as well as a variety of restaurants. While some stores and restaurants maintain direct relationships with individual fishermen, most transactions involve middlemen. These intermediaries are sometimes referred to as “coyotes,” a term that can carry a derogatory connotation but often does not reflect the services they provide. Middlemen act as ready cash buyers for fishermen. They also represent reliable suppliers for buyers by working with a diverse network of fishermen. Additionally, they sometimes offer loans to fishermen and credit to buyers, thus playing an important role in the local fishing economy.



The people selling fish from coolers along the street in La Crucecita are usually not fishermen. Like local street sellers of many things, these vendors are trying to make a living by buying fish from middlemen and reselling for a profit. This shouldn't dissuade anyone from buying from these vendors as it supports their livelihood and can be a convenient way to buy fish and seafood.

Current Fishing Conditions

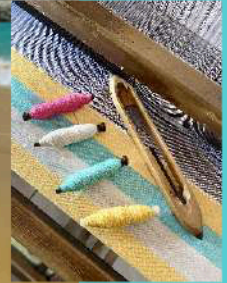
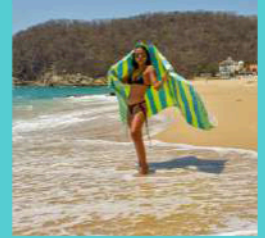
With the plethora of oceanic variables, it is difficult to determine why fishing in the Huatulco area is poor this year. The water, for whatever reason, is warmer, not favoring a productive fishery, particularly for dorado (mahi mahi) and tuna. Fishermen have been forced to go much farther from shore to try their luck, up to 20 - 30 kilometers, making fishing more expensive, time-consuming, and risky.



Sustainability Efforts

Despite the challenges of overfishing and lack of enforcement facing the local fishing industry, some efforts are being made towards the sustainability of the fishery. In some cases, a group of local fishermen have initiated actions to move from net to hook fishing and for fishermen to agree to restrict the catch of some species to a specific calendar period. The region's extraordinary marine biodiversity highlights the importance of such efforts. Huatulco's waters are part of a migration route for humpback whales, sea turtles, and other species, offering a reminder of the interconnectedness and abundance of marine life. These seasonal migrations and the area's rich ecosystems highlight the need to balance human activity with conservation to ensure the sea's enduring abundance.

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