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From securing rights for small-scale fishers to property for “efficient” producers: the privatisation of scallop production in Sechura Bay, Peru

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Abstract

Sechura Bay in Northern Peru represents the most important location for the production of the Peruvian bay scallop (*Argopecten purpuratus*) – not only on national but also international level. This business emerged from the initiative of a hand full of small-scale entrepreneurial dive fishers finding ideal culture conditions in the large bay of Sechura, and is by now an important sector of the Peruvian economy, producing these molluscs mainly for the export market. In Sechura, it started as a rather unregulated, open access activity, where, as business rose, exclusive extraction and later territorial use rights have been granted formally under Peruvian law to small-scale fisher associations. While scallop culture is highly profitable under “normal” (environmental) conditions in Sechura Bay, it is, however, inversion intensive and a financially extremely risky business, for example when El Niño related dynamics cause scallop die-offs. After a *de facto* privatisation into the hands of those with the financial means, ability to take the risk, and other capabilities, the latest amendment of the law has paved the way for large-scale investors to hold all important property rights and to take control of the entire production process. This qualitative case study tells the story of the privatisation of the scallop business in Sechura Bay by referring to various institutional approaches. The story told is, on the one hand, conventional in the sense that a typical process of grabbing was observed: weak actors having to leave or being pushed out of a particular place or business. On the other hand, this particular process of grabbing took several turns: first, seemingly weak actors could secure their rights by achieving formalization and hence recognition from the Peruvian state, to then lose them succinctly due to a whole panoply of reasons to powerful newly entering players.

Keywords

privatisation, changes in property rights, Scallop bottom farming, Institutional change