



World Forum of Fisher Peoples' [WFFP]
FORO MUNDIAL DE PUEBLOS PESCADORES
FORUM MONDIAL DES POPULATIONAS DE PEC'HEURS
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Battle Over Paradise: Indigenous Ngäbe-Buglé Fishing Leaders Hold Emergency Congress to Defend Ancestral Fishing Rights

While COP30 is taking place in Belem, Indigenous fishing communities in Panama will convene a major regional congress to expose conservation measures imposed without consent.

WHO: Ngäbe-Buglé Indigenous fishing leaders; SITRAMAR (Union of Ngäbe-Buglé Sea Workers); elected regional authorities; Carlos Duarte, Chair of UNDROP; Panamanian civil society allies; allies from the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP). Thousands of Indigenous Panamanians are expected to attend. Panamanian officials have been invited to attend.

WHAT: Emergency Regional Congress of the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca to defend the ancestral island of Escudo de Veraguas and the right to fish for food and livelihood.

WHEN: November 13-15, 2025

WHERE: Escudo de Veraguas, Panama

WHY IT MATTERS: Escudo de Veraguas is a **legally co-managed Indigenous territory** and a primary source of food, culture, and livelihood for Ngäbe Buglé fishing communities. Yet the Panamanian government has repeatedly taken actions that **undermine Indigenous governance and criminalize their traditional fishing practices** -- without consultation or consent.

This year alone, the government has:

- Proposed a fishing ban without consulting Indigenous leaders
- Confiscated fishing gear (flippers, masks, snorkels, traps, ropes)
- Released 700 lbs of harvested lobster intended to feed families
- Violated Resolution 0299 and Law 10 guaranteeing co-management of Escudo de Veraguas

These actions also violate international declarations, including:

- UNDRIP
- UNDROP
- The right to food under ICESCR

WHO SHOULD COVER THIS:

- Climate & environment reporters
- Indigenous rights reporters
- Human rights & food sovereignty reporters
- Reporters covering COP30, Marine Protected Areas, and conservation policy

INTERVIEW AVAILABILITY:

Spokespeople available in **Spanish & English** (with interpretation):

- Ngäbe-Buglé elected regional leaders
- SITRAMAR fishing leaders
- Legal and human rights allies

CONTEXT & STORY:

As world leaders gather in the Brazilian Amazon, Indigenous communities all over the world are fighting for their lives and territories against false climate solutions that exclude the very people who have stewarded these regions for generations.

Artisanal fishing is a fundamental livelihood for thousands of families in Panama, particularly for the Ngäbe-Buglé Indigenous Peoples. For them, fishing is not only a source of subsistence and food but also a central element of their cultural identity and spiritual relationship with the natural environment.

Since 2010, the Government of Panama has successively restricted access to the traditional fishing grounds of the Ngäbe-Buglé people under the pretext of “scientific closures,” often linked to efforts to meet the global 30x30 ocean conservation targets. The government’s promise of compensation through social programs and food aid never materialized. Over the years, Indigenous fishers have resisted each closure. Of their five ancestral fishing islands, only one remains accessible today: Escudo de Veraguas.

In February 2025 the Ministry of the Environment notified the Ngäbe Buglé community of the new, proposed fishing ban on the island of Escudo de Veraguas. In September 2025, in response to this threat, two leaders with SITRAMAR, traveled to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to denounce these violations. There, they met with several special rapporteurs and country Missions including the ambassador of Panama, Juan Alberto Castillero Correa.

Upon their return, government workers confiscated fishing equipment from Indigenous fishers, including flippers, masks, snorkels, and ropes used for dive fishing. They also took their small traps used to store lobster and released up to 700 pounds of harvested lobster meant to feed entire families. **The confiscation of fishing gear and the expectation that the Ngäbe Buglé, who have lived on the coast of the Nö Kribo region for hundreds of years, would change their lives and livelihoods within the six months between February and September, are direct violations of the 2009 co-management agreements under Resolution 0299, Law 10 of 1997, and all UN-recognized Indigenous rights affirmed in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP), and the right to food in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.**

In recent years, there has been an increase in human rights violations, particularly of the right to food and nutrition of Indigenous Peoples engaged in traditional fishing in Panama. These violations are linked to [hydroelectric](#) and tourism megaprojects, the privatization of coastal and river areas, and the criminalization of those who defend access to water and natural resources.

While COP30 and the Peoples Summit are happening, the Ngäbe-Buglé will be holding the largest regional congress held to date. This ‘Extraordinary Congress’ will be held Nov 13th-15th. It will welcome special guests like Carlos Duarte, the current chair of UNDROP. Panamanian government officials are invited and encouraged to attend to find a resolution that respects their agreements with Indigenous fishing communities.

The way they see it, this congress is their battleground. “This is a battle for our lives. We don’t intend to go anywhere and we will insist the government follow the law and its obligations to co-manage Indigenous land with its Indigenous peoples and elected regional governments”, said Santiago Smith, SITRAMAR Political Advisor.

While Panama is recognized internationally for being the first Latin American country to protect over half of its national waters (54%), exceeding the 30x30 goal well ahead of schedule, conservation without consultation has resulted in the violent enforcement of ‘conservation projects’ and violates the rights of Indigenous fisher peoples to food and nutrition, territory, and culture.

Additional information: The communities in the Ngäbe Buglé region represent more than 250,000 Indigenous citizens across Panama’s mountains, coasts, and islands. In 1997, through an agreement with the Panamanian government, the Comarca (a legally recognized Indigenous territory) in the Ngäbe-Buglé region was established as a semi-autonomous Indigenous territory that grants the Ngäbe and Buglé peoples collective ownership of land and resources. This community has practiced ancestral fishing for subsistence for generations and fishing has been their primary and often main source of livelihood.

Fishing bans reflect the structural discrimination and marginalization that fisher and Indigenous Peoples have faced historically and continue to endure today. The Ngäbe-Buglé - like other Indigenous groups - have nourished their communities for centuries in harmony with nature, using only fishing rods, small traps, or traditional “lung fishing” methods to catch fish and lobster. They practice natural closures to ensure sustainable fishing in tune with the rhythm of the sea. As custodians of nature, they have always known when to stop fishing to allow species to replenish before resuming the season.

Panama is a State Party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and is therefore obligated under international law to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food and nutrition of its population, including the Indigenous fisher peoples of the Ngäbe Buglé. Denying access to their crucial fishing grounds and confiscating their fishing equipment constitute clear breaches of Panama’s human rights obligations under the ICESCR, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). Both declarations affirm the rights of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination, free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), access to their traditional territories, and the survival of their culture. These actions also contravene Resolution 0299 and Law 10 of 1997.