

Sonia Velarde Martinez (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin)

From Norm to Practice: Precarious Labor and Inequality in the Global Scallop Value Chain

This research examines the labor conditions of artisanal divers engaged in the harvesting of scallops and scallop seeds in the Bay of Sechura, Peru. The central research question asks: *What are the labor conditions of scallop-harvesting divers in Sechura Bay, and how do these conditions relate to ethical sourcing and sustainability standards promoted in European markets?*

The topic is highly relevant to contemporary debates on global sustainability, ethical consumption, and responsible supply chains. Although scallops are exported to Europe as a high-value and ostensibly sustainable luxury product, the labor conditions underpinning their production remain largely invisible and highly precarious. This research addresses a critical gap between normative frameworks and their practical implementation in extractive and aquaculture-based livelihoods in the Global South.

The study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in the Bay of Sechura, combining empirical data collection with critical theoretical analysis. It follows an exploratory and interpretive research design, focusing on everyday labor practices, occupational risks, institutional absence, and power asymmetries along the scallop value chain. The methodology includes semi-structured interviews with artisanal divers, participant observation, and systematic field notes collected during on-site research. The empirical material is analyzed through perspectives on labor precarity, global value chains, and governance in contexts of limited statehood.

Preliminary findings indicate that divers commonly work under highly informal arrangements, receiving payment according to production without written contracts, social protection, pensions, or employment benefits. Interviewees reported frequent occupational hazards, including decompression sickness, hearing loss, paralysis, and fatal accidents associated with seed collection at greater depths. Safety equipment was often described as inadequate, consisting of aging compressors, non-certified breathing hoses, and the absence of emergency oxygen kits. Several interviewees explained that, in emergency situations, affected divers are sometimes returned to the water in an attempt to alleviate symptoms because hyperbaric treatment facilities are distant and difficult to access. These findings suggest that the highest physical risks within the scallop value chain are borne by workers who remain largely excluded from sustainability and ethical sourcing initiatives in destination markets.

Conducting fieldwork in Sechura also highlighted the challenges of researching informality and occupational accidents, as some participants expressed concerns about discussing deaths, unsafe practices, and commercial relationships. This positionality informed both access to information and the interpretation of interview material.

The research raises broader questions concerning the responsibilities of international buyers and consumers, the role of the state in contexts of limited statehood, and the potential of alternative production models to reduce dependency on hazardous diving labor while improving social and environmental sustainability.