



India-Sri Lanka Fishing Dispute and Way Forward

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Why in News?

The [India-Sri Lanka fishing dispute](#) highlights the **need** for a “**humane approach**” that balances fishing livelihoods with ecological conservation in the [Palk Strait](#) and around [Katchatheevu island](#).



What is the India-Sri Lanka Fishing Dispute?

- **Location:** The dispute centers around the **Palk Strait**, the narrow body of water separating Tamil Nadu (India) and the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Palk Strait connects the Palk Bay to the Bay of Bengal.

- **Katchatheevu is a tiny, uninhabited islet in the Palk Strait.** The dispute concerns this 285-acre island, which was ceded to Sri Lanka under the **1974 Maritime Boundary Agreement**.
 - While sovereignty is legally settled in **Sri Lanka's favour**, Indian fishermen are allowed to visit the islet for drying nets and for religious purposes.
- **Fishing rights** remain a separate matter governed by historic practice, international law ([United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\), 1982](#)), and bilateral agreements.
- **Communities involved:** Traditional Tamil Nadu fishers and Sri Lanka's Northern Province fishers have shared these waters for centuries.
- **Key conflict:** Indian mechanised trawlers enter Sri Lankan waters, engaging in **bottom trawling**, which **is banned in Sri Lanka since 2017**. This damages coral reefs, shrimp habitats, and depletes fish stocks.
 - Small-scale artisanal fishers struggle to survive as mechanised trawlers pursue commercial profit, often damaging shared marine resources.
 - The conflict is thus both cross-border (India-Sri Lanka) and intra-community (artisanal vs trawler operators in Tamil Nadu).
- **High Seas Issues:** Due to depleted fish stocks, Indian fishermen are increasingly venturing into the **High Seas**, leading to arrests in **Maldivian waters** and by the **British Navy near Diego Garcia** for allegedly crossing maritime boundaries.

What Measures Can Address the India-Sri Lanka Fishing Issue and Ensure Sustainable Fisheries?

- **Distinguish livelihoods:** Prioritise **artisanal fishers** who depend on traditional, sustainable methods. **Phase out mechanised bottom trawling**, which harms ecosystems and deprives both Indian and Sri Lankan small-scale fishers.
- **Strengthen cooperation frameworks:** Establish an India-Sri Lanka Fisheries Management Council with fisher groups, scientists, and officials.
 - Use **UNCLOS Article 123** to guide cooperation in the semi-enclosed Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar.
 - Consider joint quotas (similar to the **Baltic Sea Fisheries Convention's** quota-sharing model), seasonal fishing rights, or regulated fishing days specifically for artisanal fishers.
- **Invest in alternatives:** Promote deep-sea fishing in India's 200-nautical-mile [Exclusive Economic Zone \(EEZ\)](#) to reduce pressure on near-shore resources.
 - Provide training, modern vessels, and financial support for fishers to transition away from destructive practices.
- **Depoliticise Katchatheevu:** Accept that sovereignty over Katchatheevu is legally settled under the 1974 Treaty. **Debunk myths that it was "gifted" as historical records show Sri Lanka had stronger claims.**
 - Emphasise that **fishing rights are separate from sovereignty and can still be negotiated cooperatively**. Use Katchatheevu for **joint marine research stations** and as a hub for ecological cooperation.
- **Foster community empathy:** Highlight the wartime hardships of Sri Lankan Tamil fishers to build goodwill in Tamil Nadu. Encourage **people-to-people ties**, recalling **Tamil Nadu's humanitarian support during Sri Lanka's civil war**.

Conclusion

The Katchatheevu and Palk Strait issues should be **seen as opportunities for cooperation**, not conflict. A **fair fisheries regime** that protects artisanal livelihoods and ecology is key. Smaller disputes must not overshadow the larger **vision of peace and mutual respect in South Asia**.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. The India-Sri Lanka fishing dispute reflects the clash between livelihood needs and ecological sustainability. Discuss

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Mains

Q. 'India is an age-old friend of Sri Lanka.' Discuss India's role in the recent crisis in Sri Lanka in the light of the preceding statement. **(2022)**

Q. In respect of India-Sri Lanka relations, discuss how domestic factors influence foreign policy. **(2013)**

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