Local knowledge enhances the sustainability of interconnected fisheries

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Abstract

Local knowledge may offer valuable insights for conservation aimed at sustaining biodiversity and human well-being, but its effectiveness is underexplored, particularly at large scales, where ecosystems are managed by multiple communities. Fisheries exemplify these challenges, as they often form complex, interconnected networks where fish move across spatial boundaries between managed areas. Fisheries are critical for food security and income yet face threats from overharvesting. Fisheries Co-Management (FCM) —a partnership between governments and local communities—leverages traditional knowledge to inform scientifically-driven management strategies. Nonetheless, the value of local people's knowledge in designing protection schemes remains unclear. Using a data-driven model, we evaluated FCM strategies for Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*) fisheries in a metapopulation network of protected and unprotected lakes in the Brazilian Amazon. Our findings revealed that current FCM schemes, grounded in local knowledge, are highly efficient, but can still be optimised by protecting lakes based on populations' carrying capacity. Current FCM strategies enhance food security and promote Arapaima persistence, demonstrating that conservation aligned with community well-being is achievable. Scaling FCM across the Amazon will benefit from integrating local insights with scientific evidence to safeguard biodiversity and livelihoods.

Introduction

Emerging conservation paradigms increasingly highlight the potential role of local communities in preserving ecosystem services through the protection and management of natural resources¹⁻⁴. Integrating traditional knowledge into conservation enhances environmental governance, supports local development, promotes social justice, and ensures biodiversity protection^{[5,6](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?lecWLm)}. Recent findings have revealed a long history of human coexistence with biodiversity within different biomes, illustrating that harmony between nature and people is possible^{[1,](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?dtvUth)[7](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?XP8pcN)}. This is particularly remarkable in Amazonia, where long-standing interaction has shaped a complex socio-ecological system where natural resource management is essential for maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services $(ES)^8$ $(ES)^8$. Nevertheless, limited evidence exists on whether combining local knowledge with governmental regulations is effective when conservation strategies are upscaled to a regional level.

Fisheries have historically provided essential ES for various human cultures in Amazonia ^{[5,9,10](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?bcZWww)}. Yet they are increasingly threatened by a range of stressors including overexploitation, market fluctuations and climate change^{[11](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?qIRGvy)}. Avoiding overexploitation and mitigating the challenges imposed on natural ecosystems by unsustainable practices require a balance of factors, including fish biology and ecology, management of fishing pressure, and governmental regulations. Strategies to address these challenges typically fall into two broad categories. Top-down regulations enforce conservation through protected areas and exploitation quotas $6,10$, while participatory initiatives such as Collaborative Management integrate local communities into the decision-making process $5,12$.

Understanding the impact of management decisions on ES provision is challenging due to the intricate interplay within and between ecological and human social

systems^{[13,14](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?f3gjjE)}. Recent research on small-scale fisheries emphasises the importance of integrating ecological and social dimensions for promoting sustainable practices $15,16$. In that sense, Fisheries Co-Management (FCM) schemes, in which local people and governmental entities cooperate, are particularly effective. Incorporating local knowledge empowers local communities, while enhancing compliance with top-down regulation and environmental justice^{[8,17](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?NwNDm9)}. Adopting a networked-system perspective in which entities (ecological, social, or both) interact is ideal for addressing dependencies and feedback loops typical of social-ecological systems^{[18,19](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?9WvvRC)}. However, most ES-focused network studies overlook the ecological dynamic processes (e.g. fish flow) underlying these networks^{[13,18](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ivWi3W)}, making it difficult to quantify the impact of management decisions imposed at the regional level.

We explore the FCM conservation program of Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas* (Cuvier, 1829)) from Western Brazilian Amazon (Fig 1). Arapaima is the world's largest freshwater fish, it is protected against overfishing^{[20–22](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?P6irpD)}, and it constitutes a major income for local communities 23,24 23,24 23,24 . Its floodplain ecosystem is characterised by seasonal flooding during which fish move along the main river and among areas that remain isolated during the dry season, creating a metapopulation network with seasonal dynamics. The protection of lakes by FCM has been instrumental to the recovery of the historically overfished Arapaima $25,26$ and it is recognized as one of the most promising grassroots initiatives to tackle conservation, food security, and poverty challenges across Amazonia^{[9,24](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?joRxX3)}.

However, lake protection is costly and time-consuming for fishing communities. Moreover, it remains unclear what are the social, economic and ecological attributes that make this system successful and whether the current FCM strategy, in which lakes are protected *ad-hoc* based on the historical establishment of protected areas, is optimal. To address this gap, we developed a process-based dynamical model^{[27](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?HzlPOA)} parameterized with empirical FCM data to evaluate the effects of alternative

small-scale fishing schemes on the persistence of an Arapaima metapopulation formed by a network of interconnected lakes in the Juruá River Basin (Fig 1).

We compare the current FCM scheme with six other protection scenarios based on network topology, lake characteristics, and geography (Table 1). Across scenarios, lakes (i.e., local patches in the metapopulation) can be protected or unprotected by FCM, and managed according to governmental top-down regulatory policies that set fishing quotas. We show that current FCM schemes, grounded in local knowledge, are highly efficient but can still be optimised by protecting lakes based on populations' carrying capacity. Our results demonstrate that management strategies of a networked fisheries system guided by local knowledge can outperform other approaches, highlighting the importance of incorporating local knowledge in conservation for a sustainable future.

Results

We studied an Arapaima metapopulation network in the Juruá River Basin of the Western Brazilian Amazon comprising 338 links among 31 lakes (13 protected, 18 unprotected). Understanding the network structure and its components is fundamental to capturing how Arapaima distribution and movement in the riverscape shapes its connectivity, ensuring its population persistence at different levels of fishing pressure. The Arapaima network had a density (i.e. proportion of realised links) of 0.36 and an average node degree (i.e. number of connections per lake) of 21.8 (± 6.01). Lake out-strength centrality (the sum of a lake's outgoing links), which is a measure of a lake's importance in providing fish for riverscape connectivity (used in scenarios 2 and 3), varied from 0.17 to 0.43 (mean = 0.32 ± 0.07) (Table S1; see Fig S1 for node and out-strength distribution).

Using the network topology derived from the Juruá River Basin we developed a dynamical metapopulation model of Arapaima in which local population growth is governed by the intrinsic growth rate of the species, and the carrying capacity of the lakes. Model parameter values for growth rates and carrying capacities per lake were extracted from empirical data on the Juruá River Basin fish populations (see Methods). Local populations were connected via dispersal according to the metapopulation network topology; the links between lakes were defined quantitatively as a combination of three components of the riverscape: the distance between lakes, the Arapaima's dispersal ability, and its return rate after high-tide migration observed in the field (see Methods).

To investigate the effects of fishing management strategies on riverscape-level persistence of the Arapaima population we designed seven scenarios of protection in which the 13 protected lakes were chosen according to landscape, population or social features of the system (H1-H7) (Table 1). Under the business-as-usual (H1), protected lakes were assigned based on the current management scheme informed by local people (FCM). Two topology-based scenarios were defined based on ranking lakes from most (H2) to least (H3) connected in the metapopulation network. Another scenario informed by lakes' features ranked protected lakes according to their total area (H4). Inspired by the ecology of the Arapaima populations, a further scenario based protection on the maximum estimated number of fish individuals harboured by each lake (i.e. their carrying capacity; H5). Lastly, a geography-inspired scenario allowed us to assign protected nodes according to lakes' northern/southern position, which correspond to the border of Protected Areas (H6). We used a null model (H7) which considered random allocations of protected and unprotected lakes to assess the effectiveness of H1-H6 scenarios.

We identified the determinants of Arapaima population abundance using linear regression within a model selection framework. We included three predictor variables: (i) scenario, which correspond to the seven FCM scenarios described above, (ii) protection status, defining whether a given lake is under FCM protection or not, and (iii) fishing effort, simulating the increasing legal (up to 30% of fish removed

from the local population) and illegal fishing pressure (up to 100% fish removed from the local population) in each lake. We considered the pairwise interactions between each of these variables and included lake as a random effect to account for the non-independence of observations from the same lake (Methods). Arapaima abundance was significantly affected by lake protection status, scenario, fishing effort, and their statistical interactions (Table 2, Table S3). Lake protection had a positive effect on Arapaima population abundance across all scenarios above the 0.3 fishing quota. Below that, the Arapaima population was equal, or even higher, in unprotected than protected lakes (Tukey post hoc test on the protection and scenario fixed effects; Fig 2; Table S4).

Overall, increasing fishing effort significantly reduced the average population of Arapaima across scenarios for unprotected lakes (Fig 3; Table S5). The expected adverse effect of fishing on FCM-protected lakes was buffered by the 0.3 maximum quota established in these lakes. Maintaining this quota allowed the Arapaima population to remain stable in protected lakes across all scenarios, even under high fishing pressure in unprotected lakes. Yet, the scenario based on the carrying capacity (i.e. protecting lakes that can harbour the larger number of fish, H5) consistently showed the highest population of Arapaima, followed by business-as-usual (H1) (Fig 3).

Furthermore, protecting lakes with the highest carrying capacity (H5) showed the lowest overall difference in Arapaima abundance between protected and unprotected lakes (Est = -0.10 , SE = 0.03, t = -3.00 ; Fig 2; Table S4), generating a better balance between protected and unprotected lakes at the riverscape scale. Similar to business-as-usual (H1), protecting lakes under the carrying capacity scenario (H5) proved efficient for unprotected lakes under higher fishing efforts. This was due to the magnitude of the decline in Arapaima population being less abrupt than in other scenarios (Fig 3; Table S3). Interestingly, the carrying capacity and the business-as-usual scenarios showed the highest differences between protected and

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unprotected lakes at low fishing pressure (<=0.3), in which unprotected lakes harboured more Arapaima than protected ones (Fig S2, Table S5). Conversely, the difference between protected and unprotected lakes was relatively lower at higher fishing effort (>0.3) in both cases (Fig S2).

Arapaima population in unprotected lakes was similar among scenarios at low fishing effort (<0.3), and differences among scenarios were only noticeable at high efforts (Fig 3). The system started to collapse at intermediate levels of fishing effort (>= 0.6) for the most connected (H2), least connected (H3) and the geography (H6) scenarios (Fig 3, Table S5). Randomly protecting lakes was generally less efficient than implementing a purposely designed management scheme, highlighting the importance of decision-making in FCM (Fig 3).

Persistence at the metapopulation level

The choice of management scenario also had implications for the regional persistence of the Arapaima metapopulation (Fig 4). Our temporal data showed that at the beginning of FCM, lakes that had very few individuals (e.g., Onça and Santo Antônio), or even none (Janiceto) still recovered with the onset of FCM initiatives (Table S6; Fig S3, S4). Therefore, we first considered qualitative persistence (i.e., the proportion of lakes with Arapaima abundances larger than zero). While business-as-usual (H1), area (H4) and carrying capacity (H5) scenarios performed similarly, scenarios based on the most and least connected (H2, H3) and geography (H6) (Fig 4, left panel) resulted in a faster collapse of the metapopulation, starting at a fishing quota of 0.5. For the more robust scenarios, Arapaima populations only went extinct at the riverscape level above a 0.9 fishing effort.

We additionally quantified persistence at the metapopulation level as the proportion of lakes in the riverscape with a population abundance of Arapaima at least half of the lake's carrying capacity (K) (Fig 4, right panel). This way of assessing metapopulation persistence considers that viable populations should be large enough

to be resilient to stochastic extinctions and maintain a stock that is large enough in the long term to ensure sustainability. The carrying capacity (H5) emerged as the best scenario, suggesting that this management strategy better allows the metapopulation to support harvesting. The current FCM was the second-best scenario as lakes dropped below the half carrying capacity threshold when reaching a 0.5 fishing effort. A random choice of lake protection (H7) performed the worst, as even in the absence of fishing pressure, only about 80% of the lakes are able to maintain fish populations at this level. This indicates that protecting lakes without any criteria is an ineffective strategy at the riverscape scale. The metapopulation does not entirely collapse in any scenario as there are always some lakes remaining in the system (around 40% of the lakes persist at the highest fishing effort in all scenarios; Fig 4). This is likely due to the positive growth rate of local populations adopted in our models, which always ensures the replenishment of individuals after harvesting, even at low population levels.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates the critical role of local knowledge in shaping effective conservation strategies within complex socio-ecological systems. By evaluating Fisheries Co-Management (FCM) schemes for the Arapaima metapopulation in Amazonia, we show that strategies rooted in local insights can perform as well as, or better than, alternatives even at large geographical scales. While the carrying capacity-based model provided the highest population persistence, the local knowledge-driven approach closely matched its efficacy. This underscores the value of integrating traditional knowledge in management schemes of interconnected systems at large geographical scales, for sustaining ecosystems and building resilience to exploitation pressures.

The interconnected lakes in the metapopulation network are crucial for sustaining the Arapaima socio-ecological system in the Juruá region. Arapaima can travel up to 90

km, facilitating dispersal and buffering against local disturbances. Their high site fidelity (\sim 77% return to protected lakes 28 28 28) stabilises local populations, while positive growth rates help offset moderate fishing pressure in unprotected lakes, because protected ones serve as sources of juvenile fish. However, without effective FCM these mechanisms fail, as shown by the sharp population declines when harvesting exceeds 60%, aligning with findings from other regions^{[29](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?iHQfrP)}. Given the complexity of social-ecological systems, empirically testing management scenarios is impractical. Therefore, holistic models such as the one we present, which integrate various socio-ecological factors, are valuable for identifying optimal configurations and informing decision-making^{[11,15](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?8Oni85)}.

Historically, Juruá fishers have selected lakes for protection through trial and error, like many other small-scale fisheries^{[15](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?nvNrGs)}. This strategy started as a random scenario, and we show that protection without any criteria is the least effective scheme. As the system evolved, nowadays experienced fishers choose lakes to be managed based on a combination of area, capacity, and proximity to the main river (JV Campos-Silva, pers. knowledge). Our findings suggest that the current FCM scheme is efficient to recover the Arapaima population but could be improved by protecting lakes based on their carrying capacity. This approach would boost Arapaima populations in protected lakes and maintain stocks in unprotected lakes, optimising source-sink dynamics. At the same time, our results likely represent a best-case scenario because Arapaima growth rates were based on data from well-protected lakes in the region, while illegal fishing might alter growth rates, dispersal, and site fidelity.

Enhancing ecosystem services is a primary goal in Protected Areas^{[5,6](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?xT5OCe)}. However, the geography scenario, which focused on lakes at the borders of two regional Protected Areas, proved ineffective for Arapaima conservation, especially when illegal fishing exceeded 30%. These protected lakes had some of the lowest Arapaima populations, indicating that top-down management and simple land demarcation are

insufficient without controlling illegal fishing. Similarly, the scenarios based on network connectivity, which prioritised either the most or least connected lakes or those based on lake area, did not outperform the business-as-usual or carrying capacity schemes at the lake or the metapopulation scales.

Although well-designed management strategies can counteract the negative effects of illegal fishing and enhance conservation, they may inadvertently fuel illegal fishing activities, which remain widespread across the Amazon. Market saturation with illegal products drives down prices, fosters unfair competition, and undermines fair trade efforts^{[30](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?4EPIWl)}. While there is potential to expand Arapaima trade to other Brazilian states or for export, current consumption remains concentrated in the Northern region, where the annual harvest easily saturates the market. Increasing Arapaima populations in unprotected areas could further destabilise the market, encouraging unfair practices and weakening the sustainability of managed fisheries.

In many developing countries, small-scale fisheries lack protection frameworks^{[11](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?zxGis8)}. The successful Arapaima FCM could be expanded to other Amazon regions and beyond to enhance biodiversity conservation and local well-being. In the Jarauá channel within the Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve, where Arapaima counting methods and FCM began in 1999 31 , the recovery of Arapaima populations from near extinction was key in shaping governmental policies^{[10](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?aAQa3o)}. Current federal legislation, which enforces a 0.3 fishing quota, has ensured fisheries ecosystem services at a regional scale. Expanding similar FCM schemes across the Amazon could further enhance sustainable fishing services. Nevertheless, effective management must address the specific local conditions underlying the socio-ecological networks, aiming beyond minimum standards to optimise spatial, ecological, and social factors influencing species population dynamics 15 .

Our study underscores the importance of data-driven management strategies to maintain sustainable local fisheries, showing that while the current FCM scheme stabilises populations, protecting lakes based on carrying capacity could further enhance resilience, especially under high illegal fishing pressures. Expanding this and similarly effective FCM practices across Amazonia could significantly benefit conservation and local communities. We recommend that future models integrate local knowledge with empirical data and be applied thoughtfully, considering the complexities of social-ecological systems and potential data limitations. Ultimately, selecting strategies that balance ecological sustainability with the needs of local communities is essential for the long-term success of co-management and similar conservation efforts.

Materials and Methods

Study system

We studied 31 oxbow lakes along the Juruá River Basin, Western Brazilian Amazon, harbouring a set of 13 local fisheries that rely on the sustainable harvest of Arapaima for subsistence and local economy (Fig 1, Table S1). Lakes and fishing communities are part of both a territorial management, which includes two protected areas (PA; Uacari Sustainable Development Reserve and Médio Juruá Extractivism Reserve), and a community-based management (FCM). Lakes within PAs are protected by law, thus illegal fishing is theoretically absent in the lakes within. However, it is clear from local knowledge that PAs are not enough to guarantee a sustainable fishing in the region. In turn, the current FCM scheme at Juruá River works equally well for lakes within and outside PAs^{[6,23](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?gtL3mP)}. Within this FCM scheme, local communities are legally empowered to protect their fishing grounds (most oxbow lakes) against large-scale commercial and illegal fisheries. During the dry season, oxbow lakes are discrete units in the riverscape that can be monopolised by one or a few fishing communities**.**

Fishing quotas for each community are granted according to the Arapaima population size in each managed lake, which have been monitored for at least three consecutive years before entering the FCM scheme. Fishing quotas are granted by the federal governmental agency (Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente - IBAMA) in accordance with fishing communities and local associations and can vary over time. The legal fishing quota applies only to lakes within the FCM scheme and can reach up to 30% of the Arapaima population of a given lake. Lakes outside FCM and/or conservation units may experience illegal fishing all year around^{[30](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?LWcq7C)}. For this study, **protected lakes** (13 lakes) correspond to 'no-take' areas designed to ensure the Arapaima reproduction, in which fisheries are not permitted apart from a sustainable off-take during a short period once each year and based on a strict fishing quota; protected lakes are co-managed by local communities that follow IBAMA regulations. In turn **unprotected lakes (18 lakes)** are not managed by FCM nor IBAMA and are prone to exploitation by commercial fisheries that are generally uncontrolled, and all sorts of illegal fisheries.

Dataset

We gathered data on Arapaima population numbers across all studied lakes from a previous study [23](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ScbVMS) and FCM information from our local partner institution (Juruá Institute, institutojurua.org.br). The Arapaima population dataset contains the number of adults in each lake in 2013, counted by local experts and following methods developed and validated elsewhere^{[31](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ApSLE1)}. Additionally, we retrieved temporal Arapaima population data from annual reports submitted by the local associations (Associação de Produtores Rurais de Carauari - ASPROC, and Associação de Moradores Extrativistas da Comunidade São Raimundo – AMECSARA) to IBAMA. We compiled a temporal series from 2011-2022 containing the number of Arapaima juveniles and adults in each of the 31 study lakes, also counted by local expert fishers as part of the FCM. Yet, the year that FCM started in each lake was different and 21 of those did not have continuous information. Therefore, only a subset of lakes were used as the baseline for modelling population dynamics (see below).

Metapopulation network

We represented the riverscape formed by a set of Arapaima populations and their spatial connectivity as a weighted directed network in which nodes represent local patches of habitats (i.e. oxbow lakes) and links between them represent dispersal corridors that the species can use to move across the riverscape. Links between lakes were defined quantitatively as a combination of three components of the riverscape: the distance between lakes, the Arapaima's dispersal ability, and its return rate after high-tide migration, as follows:

i. Distance: the pairwise river-flow geographic distance (km) between lakes *i* (source) and *j* (target)*, d_{;;},* during the flooding season, when the high tides of the Juruá River enable fish movement from lake to lake. Distance was estimated using the 'Base Hidrográfica Ottocodificada (BHO) Multiescalas 2017 5k (BHO 2017 5k), an hydrographic database available from the National Water Agency of Brazil^{[32](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?yJYqdM)}. The hydrographic basin follows the Pfafstetter Coding System that includes topological information within the code, extracted from the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission - SRTM, mapped from 11 to 22 February 2000, with a 30 m spatial resolution. Distances were calculated using the Quantum GIS 3.32^{[33](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?tsfCng)} software and the analytical extension called QNEAT3. We calculated the river-flow geographic distance among lakes as the sum of distances resulting from: (i) the Euclidian distance from the source lake *i* to the nearest river channel; (ii) the distance from the entry point to the exit cost towards lake *j* following the river course; and (iii) the Euclidian distance from the exit point to the destination lake j . We scaled $d_{_{ij}}$ to reflect the fact that the closer two lakes are, the stronger their link, and consequently the ability of a fish to reach the target lake. Scaling followed the formula:

$$
d'_{ij} = 1/[\log(d_{ij})/min(d)] \tag{1}
$$

where min(d) is the minimum distance across all pairs of lakes. $d^{\centerdot}_{\:\:ij}$ ranges between 0 and 1. We then normalised the outgoing links of each lake i by dividing each of them by their sum (analogous to dividing the row of a matrix by its sum), using the formula:

$$
v_{ij} = d'_{ij} / \sum_{j=1 \neq i} d'_{ij}
$$
 (2)

This provided the relative probability of fish to move to any lake j from a source lake i . This method is like calculating the flow of information in social and ecological networks^{[34,35](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?M3YSyz)}.

ii. Dispersal capacity: The maximum distance travelled by an adult Arapaima individual during the high-tide river flooding, which was recorded by GPS tracker as 90 km (Campos-Silva, pers. knowledge). We set the links in which pairwise distances were above 90 km to zero.

iii. Return rate: The average return rate of adult Arapaima individuals to their lake of origin, where they stay during the dry season. Previous studies found that a high proportion of individuals from lakes under FCM return to their lake of departure, ranging from 71% to 83% 28,36 28,36 28,36 . We used an average return rate (λ) of 0.77 to lakes under the FCM scheme. Lake connectivity was then multiplied by $1 - \lambda$, reflecting the proportion of individuals that will not return to the departure lake, thus effectively contributing to network connectivity.

We integrated three components into a single metric for pairwise connectivity between lakes, which is the weight of a link in the metapopulation network, $\omega_{_{ij}}^{}$, as follows:

 $\omega_{ij}^{}~=~0$, if distance between a pair of lakes is above 90 km, otherwise,

 $\omega_{_{ij}}$ = $v_{_{ij}}$, if lake *k* is not under FCM management, otherwise $\omega_{ij} = v_{ij}(1 - \lambda)$, if lake *k* is under FCM management (3)

Metapopulation model

To investigate the potential effects of changing fishing policies on Arapaima across the riverscape shown in Fig 1, we considered the set of lakes connected via the metapopulation network described above as a metapopulation composed of local Arapaima populations / habitat patches. We modelled each lake's local population growth using a density-dependent growth equation and dispersal following the established connectivity between lakes (see *Metapopulation network*). We used the Ricker population equation 37 , with an added stochastic term to account for the effects of year-to-year environmental variability on population growth, to model local population dynamics:

$$
N_{t+1} = N_e^{r(1-N_t/K)+\varepsilon} \tag{4}
$$

where $N_{_{t}}$ is the abundance of the population at time t , r is the intrinsic growth rate of the population, and *K* is its carrying capacity. ε is a normally distributed stochastic variable representing stochastic environmental variability in population growth $\varepsilon \sim N(0, \sigma)$.

To leverage the data collected from our study system, we derived empirical values for the model parameters from the temporal abundance data of local Arapaima populations in specific lakes (see the Dataset subsection above). From this dataset, we selected a time series of adult Arapaima population abundance within specific lakes, focusing on those with at least seven consecutive data points (years) available between 2011 and 2022 (see Table S6). This criterion yielded 10 lakes for which

population abundances were considered of enough resolution to calculate parameters *r* and *K* for the model above (Eq. 4). The lakes selected were: Branco (5), Dona Maria (6), Janiceto (9), Manaria (10), Mandioca (11), Marari (12), Onça (14), Sacado do Juburi (19), Samaúma (20) and Santo Antônio (22) (Fig 1).

To calculate *r* and *K*, we conducted a linear regression analysis over the per-capita growth rate, calculated as $ln(N_{_{t+1}}/N_{_{t}})$, against $N_{_{t}}$ for each of these 10 populations independently, with *r* being the y-intercept and *K* the x-intercept, respectively. Using this information, we used a constant value of *r* = 1.04 across all local populations in the model, which was equal to the average value across these ten populations^{[36](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?3QSwyz)}. We additionally calculated σ as the variance of this set of *r* values ($\sigma = 0.085$). Information on carrying capacities for each local population *K* was complemented with local fisher expert knowledge (Campos-Silva, pers. knowledge), and assigned individually to each local population, including those for which semi-complete temporal series were not available. Values of *K* for each local population are shown in Table S6.

We connected local populations growing according to Eq. 4 through dispersal, as defined by the metapopulation network. To do so, we incorporated an influx and outflux terms into the model:

$$
N_{t,i} = N_{t-1,i}e^{r(1-N_{t-1,i}/K_i)+\epsilon} + \sum_{j=1, i\neq j}^{L} \omega_{ij}N_{t,j} - \sum_{j=1, j\neq i}^{L} \omega_{ji}N_{t,i}
$$
(5)

where $N_{_{t,i}}$ is the abundance of Arapaima population in lake *i* at time *t*, L is the total number of lakes, and rates $\omega_{_{ij}}$ and $\omega_{_{ji}}$ are the dispersal rates from lake *i* to *j* and from lake *j* to *i*, respectively. To incorporate the effects of harvesting into our

metapopulation model, we added an extra term for harvesting rate, extending Eq 5 to:

$$
N_{t,i} = N_{t-1,i}e^{r(1-N_{t-1,i}/K_i)+\epsilon} + \sum_{j=1, i\neq j}^{L} \omega_{ij}N_{t,j} - \sum_{j=1, j\neq i}^{L} \omega_{ji}N_{t,i} - hN_{t,i}
$$
 (6)

where *h* is the harvesting rate, or fishing effort (i.e. the fraction of Arapaima fishes extracted from the population). For each of the scenarios (Table 1) we varied *h* across a range of values from 0 to 1 at 0.1 intervals, for unprotected lakes only. This yielded a total of 11 values of harvesting rate. For protected lakes we used 0.3 for values of h > 0.3 to ensure protection.

We ran numerical simulations for each management scenario by starting the metapopulation at random initial abundances across local lakes, chosen from a uniform distribution across the values of *K* (i.e. $N_{1,i} \sim U(min(K), max(K))$ ∀ i). We used a different metapopulation network for each scenario because we varied the protected and unprotected lakes (Table 1). For instance, when choosing to protect larger lakes (H4), we changed the metapopulation network by defining the 13 lakes with the greater area as protected and the 18 remaining ones as unprotected. This was repeated for all scenarios based on the criterion used. For scenario 7 (protected lakes selected randomly) we ran 1000 replicates in which the identity of the 13 protected lakes was drawn randomly and independently for each replicate. This procedure, however, inherently results in lakes being assigned either protected or unprotected status across different replicates (since they are assigned their protection status randomly). To circumvent this, the resulting population abundances and harvested biomass were averaged across replicates of the same lake and protection status.

Then, we applied the protocol described in the 'Metapopulation model' section. This was necessary because return rates only apply to protected lakes^{[28,36](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?a1YSQx)}, which indeed change from scenario to scenario (Table S2). We ran simulations for 50 time steps, where the first 10 time steps were run without harvesting. This initial time period was found to be enough for transient dynamics to occur and the system to reach its stochastic equilibrium (i.e., random fluctuations around the lakes' carrying capacities). At time step 11 harvesting was introduced and maintained for the rest of the simulation (i.e., the further 39 time steps). This time period was enough for the system to reach its new stochastic equilibrium with harvesting. To quantify the simulation outcomes, we calculated lake occupancy (i.e., whether a lake's abundance was greater than 0) and the mean population abundance across the last 10-time steps for each lake.

Statistical analyses

To identify the main determinants of mean population abundance over the last 10-time steps of the model simulations across lakes, we performed a linear regression considering the following fixed effects: (i) scenario, (ii) protection status, (iii) fishing effort, and the pairwise interactions between each of these variables. To account for the non-independence of observations from the same lake, we added lake as a random effect variable to the model. The fitted full model was:

```
\log_{10}(mean population abundance   +  1)  ~
```

```
scenario + protected + fishing effort +
scenario::protected + protected: fishing effort + (1 | lake) (7)
```
We used a model selection framework to compare combinations of those variables to each other and to the full model. We selected the model producing the best fit using the Akaike Information Criteria (AIC). We considered all possible combinations of independent variables in the competing models and retained the model with the

lowest AIC. Mixed effect models and the model selection procedure were implemented using the *lmer* function of the *lme4* package^{[38](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?nST5f3)} and the *dredge* function of the *MuMIn* package^{[39](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?2bMqqa)}, respectively. To conduct a more detailed analysis of specific pairwise comparisons across scenarios, protection status, and fishing effort, we computed the Estimated Marginal Means for each combination of interest, applying the Tukey-adjusted test for multiple comparisons implemented in the *emmeans* function at the *emmeans* library 40 . All statistical analyses were performed in R 41 .

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Study area and the metapopulation network of the Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas***) at the Middle Jurua River Basin, Western Brazilian Amazon.** Each lake is a node in the network and is represented by a number; the list of lakes

and their attributes can be found in Table S1. The position of each lake represents its latitude/longitude coordinates along the Juruá River. Links between nodes indicate whether two lakes are spatially connected by Arapaima movement during the flooding season. Network construction is described in the Methods. Panels A, B, and C zoom in on the study area's north, central, and south regions, respectively, showing detailed connections among protected (yellow nodes) and unprotected lakes (blue nodes) performed by the Arapaima movement. Undirected links are shown for clarity. We used ArcGIS and Arcmap 10.825 to draw the map layout.

Scenario ← BAU ← MC ← LC ← Area ← K ← Geography ← Random

Figure 2. The effect of protection and fishing quota on Arapaima abundance.

Each data point is the Estimated Marginal Means of log fish abundance, calculated from the statistical model and adjusted according to the other variables in the model, for protected and unprotected lakes. Each line represents the change in the Estimated Marginal Means for a specific scenario. Colours represent the Fishery Co-Management (FCM) scenarios (Table 1). Each panel is a fishing quota with quotas above 0.3 considered illegal fishing.

Figure 3. Effects of fishing effort across scenarios for protected and unprotected lakes. The plots show the average population abundance (log scale) across scenarios and increasing fishing pressure for protected and unprotected lakes. Vertical dashed lines mark the maximum fishing quota allowed by governmental authorities for lakes within the FCM. Fishing efforts to the right of the line are considered illegal. Thus, in protected lakes, the fishing effort to the right of the line is always 0.3, meaning that protected lakes are not fished for more than 30% of their Arapaima population in any scenario. Each data point represents a lake; therefore each boxplot shows the median of population abundance (log10) across the 31 studied lakes, the minimum and maximum values, the first and third quartile of data distribution, and the outliers. Simulations were run for 50 time steps for each scenario. The abundance value of each point is the average abundance over the last 10 time steps. The legend of the scenarios correspond to: BAU - Business-as-usual (H1); MC - Protecting most connected lakes (H2); LC - Protecting least connected

lakes (H3); Area - Protecting larger lakes (H4); K - Protecting lakes with higher carrying capacity (H5); Geography - Protecting lakes according to geographic position (H6); Random - Protecting lakes randomly (H7). See Table 1 for details of each scenario.

Figure 4. Effect of fishing effort on Arapaima metapopulation persistence. The plots show the proportion of lakes persisting at the metapopulation level across increasing fishing pressure for the seven simulated scenarios (Table 1). Qualitative persistence (left panel) considers a lake to persist in the metapopulation if the Arapaima abundance is > 0. Quantitative persistence (right panel) considers that a given lake persists in the system only if Arapaima abundance is at least half of the carrying capacity of that lake.

Table 1. Description of the management scenarios used to assess the potential consequences of increasing fishing pressure on the abundance and persistence of Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*) at the Middle Juruá River Basin, Western Brazilian Amazon. We compare the current FCM scheme (business-as-usual) to five hypothesis-driven alternative management scenarios and randomness (random protection scenario with no criteria). Note that in each scenario, we fix the number of protected lakes to 13, as in the current FCM. See Table S2 for the list of protected lakes in each scenario.

Table 2. Results from the Linear Mixed Model showing the effects of lake protection, management scenario and fishing effort as well as the interactions among them on the population of Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*) at Middle Juruá River Basin, Western Brazilian Amazon. The full model was selected as the best model according to Akaike Information Criteria (LogLik = -420, Delta = 0, AICc = 888.4, weight = 1); therefore only the results of this model are shown. The full model: log10(pop.means + 1) ~ scenario + protected + fishing_effort + scenario:protected + protected: exploitation $effort + scenario:fishing effort + (1 | lake)$

Supporting Information for

Local knowledge enhances the sustainability of interconnected fisheries

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This PDF file includes:

Figures S1 to S4 Tables S1 to S6

Fig. S1. Distribution of centrality metrics of the Arapaima spatial metapopulation network based on the 31 studied lakes from Middle Juruá River Basin, Western Brazilian Amazon. Total node degree (left panel) corresponds to the sum of all edges (coming in and going out links) of each lake; node out-strength is the quantitative version of out-degree, here used as a proxy for Arapaima dispersal.

Fig. S2. Differences between protected and unprotected lakes in the gradient of increasing fishing effort across the seven scenarios of Fishery CoManagement (FCM). Each dot represents the protected-unprotected log difference in the back-transformed Estimated Marginal Means for a specific scenario, adjusted according to the other variables in the model. Values below zero indicate that protected lakes have less fish than unprotected lakes; values above zero show the opposite. Details of each scenario can be found in Table 1.

Fig. S3. Population dynamics of Arapaima modelled from empirical data. The procedure to calculate the *r* and *K* parameters fitted to a logistic growth function defined above, was only applied to time series with enough observations (N = 10), defined as having at least seven consecutive values.

Fig. S4. Simulated population dynamics of Arapaima. Each local lake population dynamic is governed by a Ricker logistic equation. See Methods in the main text for further details.

Table S1. The studied lakes at the Middle Juruá River Basin, Western Brazilian Amazon, and their respective characteristics. Number of individuals corresponds to the adults of arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*) counted in 2013 by local fisheries. RDS Uacari = Uacari Sustainable Development Reserve; RESEX Médio Juruá = Médio Juruá Extractivism Reserve; FCM = Fisheries Co-Management.

ID	Lake name	Number of individuals	Area (ha)	Out-strength	Latitude	Longitude	FCM	Territorial management
1	Acurau	$\overline{2}$	42	0.430	-6.031145	-67.790355	no	RDS Uacari
$\overline{2}$	Andreza	3	90	0.190	-5.0981534	-67.140353	no	RESEX Médio Juruá
3	Aruana	10	16	0.349	-5.351325	-67.393483	no	RESEX Médio Juruá
4	Baliera	6	21	0.344	-5.3849685	-67.357977	no	RESEX Médio Juruá
5	Branco	51	15	0.284	-5.1894981	-67.277459	ves	RESEX Médio Juruá
6	Dona Maria	32	101	0.320	-5.4226337	-67.521494	ves	RESEX Médio Juruá
7	Fortuna	20	18.9	0.289	-5.744311	-67.797067	ves	RESEX Médio Juruá
8	Itabaiana	20	28	0.358	-6.004136	-67.769467	no	RDS Uacari
9	Janiceto	$\overline{2}$	6	0.316	-5.502431	-67.604511	yes	RESEX Médio Juruá
10	Manaria	4	51.4	0.321	-5.4661852	-67.522265	ves	RESEX Médio Juruá
11	Mandioca	537	293	0.292	-5.8711528	-67.805478	ves	RDS Uacari
12	Marari	259	200	0.332	-5.9410389	-67.76637	ves	RDS Uacari
13	Maximiano	676	269	0.336	-5.7611366	-67.813029	no	RDS Uacari
14	Onça	23	11	0.384	-5.5426804	-67.602305	ves	RESEX Médio Juruá
15	Preto	1	32.7	0.221	-5.1012113	-67.180216	no	RESEX Médio Juruá
16	Recreio	3	25.6	0.323	-5.531497	-67.572317	no	RDS Uacari

Table S2. List of lakes protected in each scenario, as follows: H1 - Business-as-usual; H2 - Protecting most connected lakes; H3 - Protecting least connected lakes; H4 - Protecting larger lakes; H5 - Protecting lakes with higher carrying capacity; H6 - Protecting lakes according to geographic position. For the random scenario (H7), the protected lakes might change at every iteration thus we are not fixing this information here - see Methods for further information about the random scenario. Details of each scenario can be found in Table 1. Prot = lake protected by FCM; unp = unprotected.

lake	Η1	H ₂	H3	H4	H ₅	H ₆
Acurau	unp	prot	unp	unp	unp	prot
Andreza	unp	unp	prot	prot	unp	prot
Aruana	unp	prot	unp	unp	unp	unp
Baliera	unp	unp	unp	unp	unp	unp
Branco	prot	unp	prot	unp	prot	prot
Dona Maria	prot	prot	unp	prot	prot	unp
Fortuna	prot	unp	prot	unp	prot	unp
Itabaiana	unp	prot	unp	unp	prot	prot
Janiceto	prot	unp	unp	unp	unp	unp
Manaria	prot	prot	unp	unp	prot	unp
Mandioca	prot	unp	prot	prot	prot	unp
Marari	prot	unp	prot	prot	prot	prot
Maximiano	unp	unp	unp	prot	unp	unp
Onça	prot	prot	unp	unp	prot	unp
Preto	unp	unp	prot	unp	unp	prot
Recreio	unp	prot	unp	unp	unp	unp
Redondo	prot	unp	prot	prot	unp	prot
Sacado do Ere	unp	unp	prot	prot	unp	prot
Sacado do Juburi prot unp prot prot prot						prot
Samaúma	prot		unp unp	prot	prot	unp
Santa Clara	prot			unp prot prot	unp	prot
Santo Antônio prot				prot unp unp	unp	unp

Table S3. Results from the Linear Mixed Model showing the effects of lake protection, management scenarios and different levels of fishing effort, as well as the interactions among them on the population of Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*) at Middle Juruá River BAsin, Western Amazon. The full model was selected as the best model according to Akaike Information Criteria (LogLik = -420, Delta = 0, AIC = 1); therefore, only the results of this model are shown below. Details of each scenario can be found in Table 1.

Full model: log10(pop.means + 1) ~ scenario + protected + fishing_effort + scenario:protected + protected:exploitation_effort + scenario:fishing_effort + (1 |lake)

Table S4. Post-hoc Tukey test of the Estimated Average Means (EMMeans) of arapaima population in protected and unprotected lakes in each Fishery CoManagement (FCM) scenario, following the Linear Mixed Effect Model. Only comparisons between unprotected and protected lakes within each scenario are shown. Unprotected = lakes not protected by FCM; Protected = lakes protected by FCM. Numbers 1 to 7 correspond to each scenario, as follows: 1 - Business-as-usual; 2 - Protecting most connected lakes; 3 - Protecting least connected lakes; 4 - Protecting larger lakes; 5 - Protecting lakes with higher carrying capacity; 6 - Protecting lakes according to geographic position; 7 - Protecting lakes randomly. Details of each scenario can be found in Table 1.

Table S5. Post-hoc Tukey test for the Estimated Marginal Means (EMMeans) of Arapaima population, showing pairwise differences between fishing effort in each scenario. Numbers 1 to 7 correspond to each scenario, as follows: 1 - Business-as-usual; 2 - Protecting most connected lakes; 3 - Protecting least connected lakes; 4 - Protecting larger lakes; 5 - Protecting lakes with higher carrying capacity; 6 - Protecting lakes according to geographic position; 7 - Protecting lakes randomly. Details of each scenario can be found in Table 1.

contrast	scenario	estimate	SE	df	t.ratio
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.1	1	0.070	0.005	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.2	1	0.140	0.009	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.3	1	0.210	0.014	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.4	1	0.280	0.018	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.5	1	0.351	0.023	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.6	1	0.421	0.028	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.7	1	0.491	0.032	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.8	1	0.561	0.037	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 0.9	1	0.631	0.042	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0 - Fishing effort 1	1	0.701	0.046	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.2	1	0.070	0.005	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.3	1	0.140	0.009	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.4	1	0.210	0.014	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.5	1	0.280	0.018	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.6	1	0.351	0.023	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.7	1	0.421	0.028	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.8	$\mathbf 1$	0.491	0.032	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 0.9	$\mathbf 1$	0.561	0.037	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.1 - Fishing effort 1	1	0.631	0.042	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.2 - Fishing effort 0.3 1		0.070	0.005	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.2 - Fishing effort 0.4	1	0.140	0.009	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.2 - Fishing effort 0.5	1	0.210	0.014	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.2 - Fishing effort 0.6	1	0.280	0.018	2676.000	15.183
Fishing effort 0.2 - Fishing effort 0.7	$\mathbf 1$	0.351	0.023	2676.000	15.183

Table S6. Temporal data from 2009-2022 of arapaima population used in the metapopulation model followed by the corresponding carrying capacity (K) (See main text: Methods - Metapopulation Model for details on how K was estimated). Numbers correspond to the mature arapaima individuals in each lake, counted by local fishermen in each year. Temporal data was compiled from reports from the local fishing association submitted annually to the federal environmental agency (Insituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente - IBAMA) as part of the Fishery Co-Management.

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