



# Where Women Hunt The Reef: Knowledge Stewardship In Lakshadweep's Octopus Fishery

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Octopus hunting is a traditional small scale artisanal fishery in Lakshadweep and the only fishing activity in the islands where women play a central role in harvesting, processing, and transmitting knowledge across generations. Practised through intertidal reef gleaning during low tide, this small-scale seasonal activity supports community access to food, supplementary income, and low-impact harvesting of reef resources. Initial work by CARESS profiled octopus hunters and initiated community-based catch monitoring, which was later continued by the Dakshin Foundation for two years.

Women-led stewardship and intergenerational knowledge sustain community-based fisheries.



In Lakshadweep's fragile coral atoll ecosystems, traditional octopus harvesting is a selective, low-impact practice adapted to sensitive lagoon and intertidal reef habitats.

## Field Methods

Dakshin Foundation (2019–2020) conducted catch monitoring and ethnographic engagement with women octopus hunters in Agatti and Kavaratti.

## Gendered Marine Spaces and privacy

Fisheries in Lakshadweep reflect clear gendered dimensions of labour: offshore fishing is dominated by men, while octopus harvesting is mostly carried out by women on accessible intertidal reef flats near homes, functioning as gendered marine spaces that support collective work and socially comfortable environments.

## Invisibilisation of Labour

Despite its importance, this fishery remains largely undocumented. As most octopus are consumed within households or shared through social networks, women's labour is often undervalued in fisheries narratives, highlighting the need to recognise their central role in island fisheries and coastal resource governance.

## Collective Identity and Women's Knowledge

Practised in small groups, the activity combines livelihood and social interaction. Experienced women guide younger participants in habitat recognition and sustainable harvesting, sustaining responsible practices across generations.

## Emerging Shifts and Interventions

Knowledge transfer is declining and less-selective harvesting is increasing. Limited awareness of sex identification and breeding cycles, along with coral breakage and harvesting of juveniles or egg-bearing females, threatens reef habitats. Workshops and an outreach guide promoted species identification, sex determination, and responsible harvesting, drawing on sustainable practices from other regions.

## Way Forward

Strengthening knowledge transfer, improving awareness of sustainable harvesting, and recognising the economic value of octopus catches can enhance women's livelihoods. Supporting market opportunities alongside community stewardship through locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) can help sustain octopus resources while strengthening women's roles in fisheries governance.

## Acknowledgement

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