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THE NATION > Security

River pirates: they made fortunes fishing wildly and, in the process, smuggled fernet to Uruguay.

They operated in front of River Plate's stadium, near Martín García Island and on the Uruguay River, south of Gualeguaychú. They used their nets to drag their boats full of tarpon and sailed at night to a point in the water to deliver their merchandise, for which they charged up to \$4,800 a day. They used new boats almost 10 meters long and 250 HP engines. Four people were already in prison. During wiretaps, they invoked the political protection of a provincial senator.

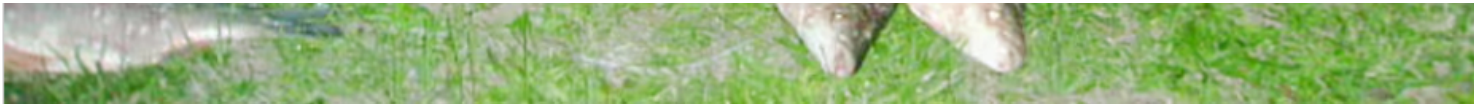
April 5, 2022 • 15:20 • 🕒 12 minutes of reading

Updated April 1, 2025

**Hernán Cappiello**

THE NATION





Part of the cargo of shad seized from river pirates
Prefecture Press



At night, the Río de la Plata is like a dark desert. Even more so if there's no moon. It takes less than two and a half hours to **cross to Uruguay, the boat loaded to the brim with fish or cases of Fernet**. They travel without lights, but fast, with a new, no-frills 8.5-meter tracker mounted on a powerful, recently acquired 250-HP Honda outboard motor. **The exchange of dollars for fish and drinks takes place in the middle of the river, in front of the Oyarbide buoy, near Martín García Island**, other times directly off the Uruguayan coast, but on this side of the canal, opposite **Nueva Palmira or Riachuelo, five kilometers from Colonia**. The desert isn't a poetic license: **the fishermen themselves refer to the river as such in their conversations, because it allows them to see the Coast Guard from afar, allowing them to accelerate fully and take off on a plane, if necessary.**

This is how the tarpon and fernet pirates operate. They fish at the mouth of the Maldonado and Medrano streams, across from River Plate's stadium, where tarpon swarm on the surface. There, the fish swarm, feeding on organic waste, feed. Without the tarpon, the ecosystem would collapse. The dorados know this, and they go there to feed. When attacked by the dorados, they make a swell in the water, which only calms down when the oil slick they leave on the river spreads, a sign that they've been hunted. But **fewer dorados are seen, because the river pirates are preying on the tarpon.**





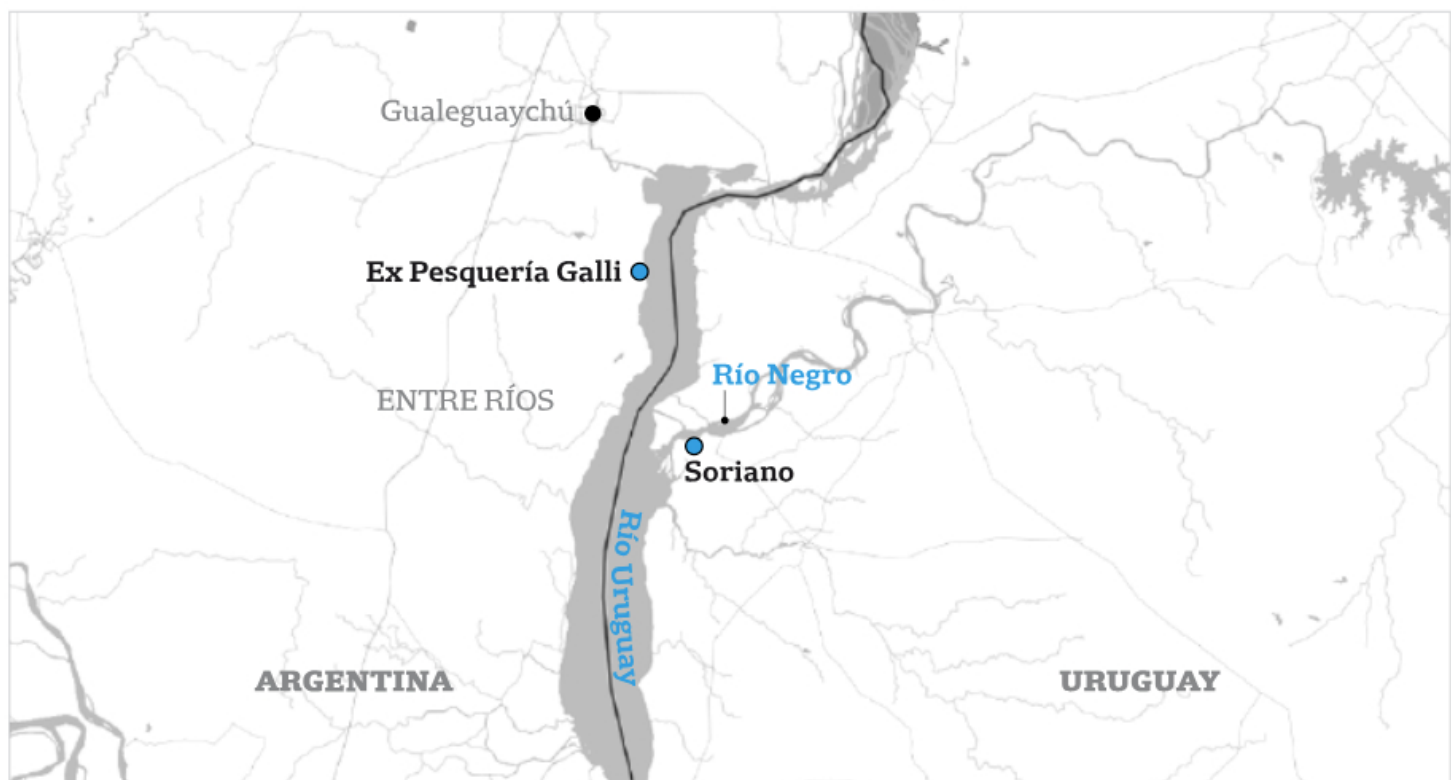
One of the groups involved in illegal fishing was caught following an investigation by federal judge Hernán Viri of Gualeguaychú. Prefecture

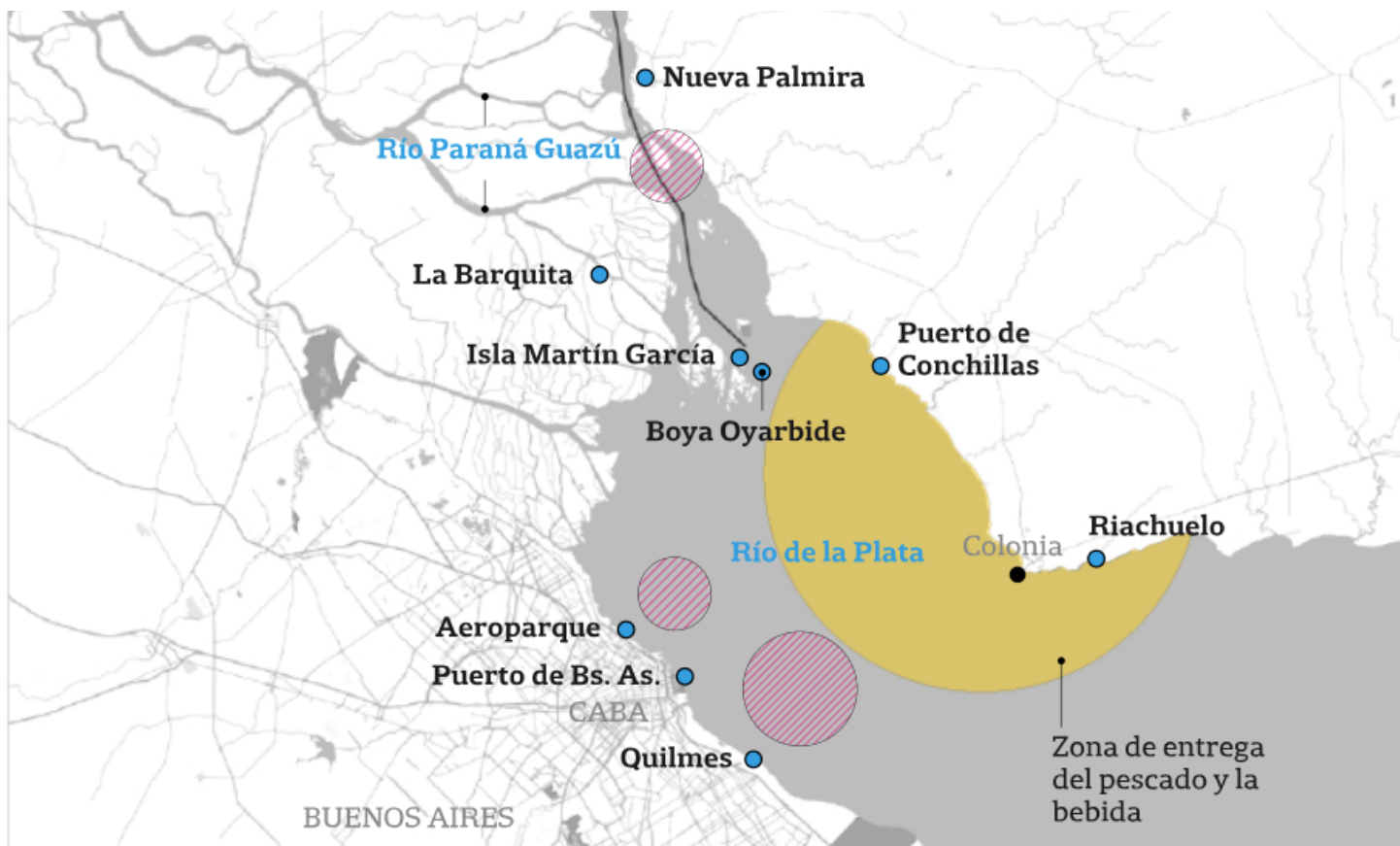
These fishermen extend their fishing grounds to Quilmes, further south, and on the Uruguay River, at the mouth of the Guazú. They act with distrust of the law, but **invoke the political protection of a Peronist provincial senator from Entre Ríos, who reportedly interceded on their behalf.** They carry up to 16,000 kilos of fish per week in their loaded trackers. **About \$12,800 in cash per week.**

A few days ago, a semi-rigid vessel from the Naval Prefecture, without lights and with its engine silent, idling, approached under cover of night some fishermen who were against the seawalls of the Port of Buenos Aires, in front of the Puerto Nuevo power plant, looking for surubí, attracted by the warm water, baiting with eels. They surprised them and ordered them to halt. The fishermen became frightened, and the Prefecture men chased them away, not before warning them that they were not following them, but **the trawlers** , a witness of the scene told **LA NACION** .

Las coordenadas de la operación ilegal

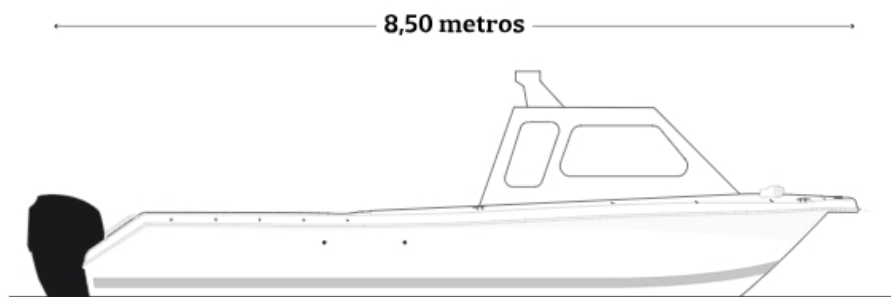
● Puntos de movimientos de la organización ● Zona de pesca





Las embarcaciones de la organización

Utilizaban dos tracker de pesca, uno con un motor fuera de borda Suzuki 150HP y el otro con un motor Honda 250HP



LA NACION

On a good day, smuggling fish and fernet to Uruguay would make up to US\$4,800 in a single day. They exchanged so many bills for pesos that, in just a few weeks, they bought land, 55-inch televisions, appliances, microwave ovens, used cars, and even a safe to store the bills they collected from the Uruguayan collectors who bought their loads.

The shad is almost never consumed in Argentina. **Ninety percent is exported to Brazil, Colombia, and Africa, where it is used to make fishmeal or fish oil** , which is used in the production of animal feed.**Export quotas were reduced last year to just over 6,000 tons due to the lowering of the Paraná River.**

Part of this illegal activity was revealed to **LA NACION** by artisanal fishermen along the Río de la Plata and frequent boaters who regularly see them fishing with trammel nets, which often become entangled in their propellers. **Other river users were threatened by these poachers .**

The other part of this activity was corroborated by an investigation by **federal judge Hernán Viri of Gualeguaychú** , who arrested and prosecuted four people with pretrial detention for triple-qualified smuggling. The detainees are **Leonardo Fabián Ceballo, Maricel Soria, Sergio Gabriel Ceballo and Walter Manuel Cano** , prosecuted with the aggravating circumstances that imply the number of people involved in the operation, the fact that their merchandise could affect public health, and the value of the merchandise, which reaches 30 million pesos.

"The evidence collected in the context of this investigation has shown that assets valued at more than 30 million pesos could have been obtained, using vessels and logistics to move thousands of kilos of smuggled fish, thereby obtaining profits in dollars, without any of its members being able to justify the financial capacity to legally prove such a level of assets," Judge Viri stated in his indictment.





Poaching, they dismantled a millionaire gang that trafficked fish from Entre Ríos

Double trouble

The problem is criminal, but also environmental. Silvio Arenas, inspector of the General Directorate of Inspection of Entre Ríos, told Federal Judge Viri that the regulations in the area where the organization operates allow fishing for up to 100 sábalo, boga, and tararira per day with nets that cannot exceed 250 meters of cloth and have a knot of 15 centimeters or more, so that the smallest fish can escape. Arenas said **the organization's type of fishing was "predatory" and "uncontrolled."**

The technique poachers use is favored by: **spearing**. Once the boat's echo sounder detects the school of fish, the tip of a trammel net is anchored and the net is circled, while the water is beaten to scare the fish into the net. **"This type of fishing is not permitted,"** said Arena, who maintained that **"It is a predatory and uncontrollable activity that seriously affects the natural fish resource, since they carry out this type of spearing two or three times a day, capturing schools of fish, especially during the reproductive season, which runs from October to March."**

The Naval Prefecture told **LA NACION** that it is conducting operations and has sent information about the seizure of nets and trammel nets in Quilmes and Ensenada; it explained that administrative violations were issued for lack of registration or security equipment. The exception is the investigation in Entre Ríos, where the Prefecture conducted surveillance in the dark, conducted nighttime surveillance, and conducted discreet inquiries among fishermen and wholesale fernet sellers. This is how they tracked down the smugglers.

The detail of the operations

Sources familiar with the Río de la Plata described the maneuvers of these clandestine fishermen: **those who had previously been "raggards" of the river now presented themselves as powerful fishermen**, engaged in indiscriminate fishing, ordering new trackers from shipyards and paying US\$60,000 in cash, crossing into Uruguay. They even identified a house in the La Barquita area, where the wild, rugged islands of the Delta blend with the shallows, blurring the border between Buenos Aires, Entre Ríos, Argentina, and Uruguay. They also often fish for boga at the mouth of the Guazú, near the Uruguay River; the pay is much better.

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These scattered details from sources scouring the river found corroboration in Judge Hernán Viri's federal

These scattered details from sources scouting the river found corroboration in Judge Hernán Vitis federal investigation. Investigators **wiretapped** the suspects. Their conversations revealed how the organization was run and how they laundered the unexpected influx of dollars they received, which led them to completely change their lifestyles.

For example, one of the detainees, Sergio Ceballo, is talking to a colleague he calls Perrín, and tells him about his business. “Where were you fishing? Were you at Martín García?” Perrín asks, to which Ceballo replies: “Sure... we were fishing near River Plate stadium, more or less, across from the port of Buenos Aires, right where the port ends, you know? The last channel, the southern channel.” Perrín asked again: “And that all goes to Uruguay?” To which Ceballo replies: “All to Uruguay, yes; sometimes we deliver it to Conchillas. And whoever actually catches tarpon takes it directly to Uruguay; it costs almost 87 pesos.” Perrín wants to know: “Do you take it? Or do they pick it up there? I mean, does the guy from Conchillas come and pick it up for you?” Ceballo clarifies: “No, I took him to the canal; here comes the canoe, loads him, and takes him away. We work like this, you know. No, I wouldn't go near the coast, not even in my head.” Perrín is worried about the Coast Guard: “No, not there, because the river there is a desert, it's so wide. If a Coast Guard officer is coming, you see him from afar along the canal and well, you move... you start moving and we go inland, I mean, as if you were going to the Uruguayan coast, and... there's no way,” Ceballo responded.



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The catch was pouring in like manna from heaven: “You're in heaven, you're in heaven with the fish in Uruguay,” Perrín told Ceballo, who replied, “Yes, yes. This week, in four days, we caught 16,000 kilos. We caught them there and sold them all without a problem. And if we could bring in more, we'd bring you more... but really, yes.”

Political protection

In another conversation, they discuss the protection they need to avoid the Prefecture: “Hey, listen to me... tomorrow we have to be at the city hall. Are you saying they're going to give us the runaround at the City Hall of...”, and one of their interlocutors interrupts: “I'll talk to the senator, Leo,” to which Ceballo reproaches: “But you should have already sent a message to the senator, idiot.” His interlocutor explained: “I can't talk to the senator without going there first to ask if they'll give it to me.”

The Prefecture inferred that Ceballo would appear in the municipality of Islas del Ibicuy to get the Prefecture's inspections stopped, as they had been fined. Therefore, they needed to obtain a municipal permit to work in the area. For this reason, they had used “political influence” through a provincial senator named Daniel, who allegedly interceded on their behalf with the municipal government. The federal court investigated the provincial senator and followed up on that lead, but so far, it hasn't found anything linking him to the case.

The organization sought protection from the municipality because it had already clashed with the Villa Paranacito and Ibicuy Prefectures. They also sought to speak with the provincial senator who had previously helped them, given that he would have significant “political clout” to intercede with the head of the local Prefecture, using influence to their advantage to pressure and get away with violations. The organization had rented a house on La Barquita Creek in the Delta for fishing trips to that area.

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The wiretaps mention currency exchange transactions involving more than US\$5,000, the purchase of more boats, and the opening of the former Galli Fishery, the organization's operations center, on the coast of the Uruguay River, as a resort to launder the business's proceeds.

Side business

Fernet was an addition when the fishing volume declined. They bought between 20 and 60 cases of 12 bottles each, which they paid for approximately \$3 in Gualeguaychú, and sold them for double the price in Uruguay.

A complement to the fish.

The wiretaps reveal that Maricel Soria, for example, is interested in buying a new house and has acquired a piece of land. Leonardo Ceballo was inquiring about a Jeep Renegade and a new outboard motor, and left a US\$2,000 down payment for a new boat being built at a shipyard to go corvina fishing in April. They even

\$55,000 down payment for a new boat being built at a shipyard to go on that fishing trip. They even went on vacation in Miramar this summer, to a house rented for \$55,000.

The money flow was so large that they needed a safe to store the dollars. On January 19, Leonardo Ceballo called a salesman: "Hi, I just sent you a message, you gave me your number," and the man replied: "Yes, yes... exactly. About the safes..." Ceballo replied, "Uh-huh, yes, um... listen to me, and now in the morning we can go see each other?" The diligent salesman arranged a meeting for that day. The purchase was completed, and the safe was found and seized at the home of Leonardo Ceballo and his wife, Maricel Soria.

She apparently saved up dollars on the side, behind her husband's back, and told her friends, "I bought the shredder I was missing, I bought the microwave, what else, I bought the 55-inch TV... the 32-inch TV, and a computer." Her friend said, "Ha, you bought a treadmill." Maricel replied, "Well, yes, because you saw I had that much saved up... Look, I'm paying \$1,200, all in cash."

She couldn't contain herself. Her friend Candela commented, "Oh, fine, well, maybe they'll give you a piece of shit, that's all, but anyway, it's already bought." Maricel replied, "I know, but with my savings, with my savings, Cande." To the shopping list, she added a used car, a new mattress, and a complete carob room for her daughter.

Things were going so well for her that she thought she needed something else: "I was going to buy a money-counting machine, because otherwise you'll become an idiot. But yes, I'm sure I'll buy it tomorrow afternoon, because you know I have to pay a lot of people here in the fields, and the fish."

Their good fortune lasted a few months, between November 14, 2019, and March 5, when they were raided and arrested.

By [Hernán Cappiello](#)

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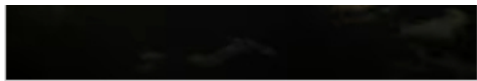
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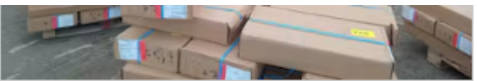




Blue Hole. The country signed an agreement to regulate foreign fishing in the troubled Mile 201



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ne eliminated from his diet to lose 90 kilos.



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responded harshly to Viviana Canosa and asked Adrián Suar to kick her off the channel.



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claimed the reasons for their separation.



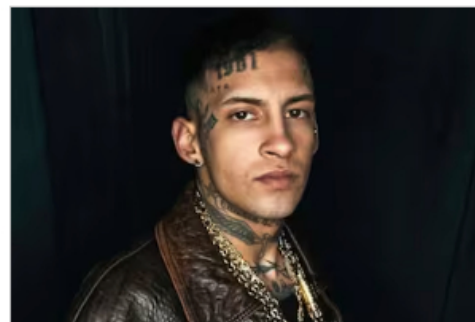
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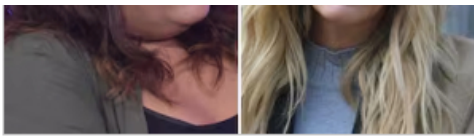


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They say that a fish starts to rot from the head... Politics, in this case.

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How strange a Peronist Senator involved in something illegal...!

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They're all on fire...fishermen, the Prefecture, judges, and senators...allowing the export of this contaminated fish is crazy...!!!

♡ 2

**Maudano** · APRIL 5, 2022

You don't mess around with Fernet. Serious crime.

♡ 0

**acev81637** · APRIL 5, 2022

With a senator involved... What could go wrong...?

♡ 2

**Koi_Hakavod** · APRIL 5, 2022

Everything can be fixed, but that Fernet thing is unforgivable.

♡ 0

**forino** · APRIL 5, 2022

The river is full of fishing nets and longlines. The National Police (PNA) acts like a fool when we report them. I chose to cut down every longline and longline I see. And I'll put up with whatever comes.

The crime they are being prosecuted for is danger to navigation, not illegal fishing.

We are the only country that exports river fish, thanks to the Tandil goose, which reauthorized river fish exports back in 2017...

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**vent83980** · APRIL 5, 2022

They discovered gunpowder. Macri the cat approved the export of freshwater fish.

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**COMEXMEP27** · APRIL 5, 2022

Yes, of course, MM is guilty of everything, from 1785 to today.

♡ 2

**queen of tolosa** · APRIL 4, 2022



This is provincial senator Daniel Olano, from the front of the old woman weighing euros????

♡ 6 10



forino · APRIL 5, 2022

Senator from Entre Rios, but they were fishing in front of River Plate's stadium... they're all in cahoots, even the National Action Party (PNA).

♡ 0 10



queen of tolosa · APRIL 4, 2022

And they caught this Daniel, senator for Entre Rios????

♡ 1 10



Gatofino · APRIL 4, 2022

I support Fernet smuggling! It's incredibly expensive here in Uruguay!

♡ 0 10



jovanini · APRIL 3, 2022

And here we are, every day a little worse.

♡ 1 10



gdel23526 · APRIL 3, 2022

Sabalos from the Maldonado stream (meters from the airport) and the Medrano stream (very close to the Children's Park), there cannot be a more contaminated fish

♡ 6 10



gdel23526 · APRIL 3, 2022

How much would the FDT senator get?

♡ 4 10



alejandrogomez66 · APRIL 3, 2022

The day illegal commercial fishing in the Paraná River is investigated, many should be imprisoned. The authorities do nothing to protect the resources. I wish there were more prosecutors and judges like these!

♡ 5 10

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