

# IUU fishing

**About 20% of fish caught are the product of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing - a global scourge that fleeces the economy and environment, impoverishes coastal communities, and has sinister links to slavery, drugs, human trafficking and terrorism. Some of the world's poorest people are hardest hit; communities totally reliant on local fish for food but without the means to police their seas can only watch the lights on the horizon stealing their fish. While the pandemic of illicit fishing endures all conservation efforts will be undermined: urgent action must be taken to track all fishing vessels, trace every fish from ship to port to shelf, and catch, prosecute and sanction IUU fishers.**

## TALKING POINTS

- Did you know that you have likely dined on the spoils of pirates? If you had to sit down to dinner with 4 friends and all order seafood, it is more than likely that at least one of you would be eating a stolen fish.
- This is a global problem that is particularly harmful to those countries that don't have the resources to effectively monitor and enforce their waters.
- There are no benefits from IUU fishing to anyone other than a small group of free riders who are taking advantage of lax rules and the immensity of the global Ocean to secure short term profit at a huge, environmental, social and economic cost.
- IUU fishing steals food from the plates of coastal communities and small-scale fishers. It wrecks ecosystems and habitats because illegal fishers can use destructive gear or ignore catch limits with little thought for the ecological impacts of their activities.
- A study released in March 2020 by the University of British Columbia estimates that between 8-14 million metric tons of fish caught illegally each year, at a value of US\$9-17 billion. However the economic loss from this illegal catch is much higher- between US\$ 26-50 billion when the full economic effects are multiplied- ie the added value in terms of wages, loss of trade and tax revenue.
- Illegal fishing, by large commercial vessels which can now fish deeper and further from shore than ever before has been enabled by new technologies like fish-finding devices and huge engines.

- Illegal fishers have been connected to human slavery and trafficking; to drugs smuggling and guns running. It is recognized by the United Nations as organized crime.
- Slave labour is feeding the frozen fish cabinets of the United States and Europe.
- Government spending on subsidies has also been supporting illegal fishing activities.

## **WHAT ARE IUU FISHING ACTIVITIES?**

- Illegal - meaning that they violate applicable national or international laws or policies;
- Unreported - meaning that they have not reported catch in areas where such reporting is required - so skewing assessments of fish stocks; or
- Unregulated - meaning that they are inconsistent with relevant international laws or rules, but either the activities are not regulated (i.e.: there are no laws/rules in place at all), or the involved fishing vessels are not able to be regulated because they are flying the flag of a State that is not a member of the relevant regional fishery management organization or is not flying any flag at all.

## **CONSEQUENCES**

- There is no reliable way to measure the impacts of IUU fishing on the marine life that is either directly targeted or incidentally hooked and killed as 'collateral damage' by fishermen looking for something else, and it's the legitimate fishermen - those who follow the rules - that bear the burden when there simply isn't more fish in the sea.
- A particular problem is that reliance on flag States as the primary enforcers (each fishing vessel is viewed as a small piece of the national territory of the country whose flag it flies). This enables irresponsible flag States to evade their obligations.
- Vessels can rapidly change names, ownership and flag registry to evade enforcement. Vessel owners from countries that belong to a regional fisheries management organization (RFMO) remain free to reflag their vessels to other States that are not members of that regional body, and fish in the same waters but not under the same rules as their fellow nationals, and the true or

“beneficial” owners are not required to reveal themselves or their vessel’s history before reflagging a ship to a different country.

- Transshipments at sea also provide a huge loophole that IUU fishers can exploit. The movement of goods from one vessel to another- generally from a fishing vessel to a refrigerated cargo ship or “reefer”- provides a way for unscrupulous operators to bypass port controls and monitoring.
- Illicit fishing undermines virtually all Ocean conservation initiatives including marine reserves/ protected areas, implementing laws to end overfishing, and instituting ecosystem-based fisheries management.
- IUU fishing also encourages other criminal activities.
- The UN Office of Organized Crime has recognized that illegal fishing is associated with drugs smuggling, people trafficking and guns running. See this [recent report](#) on the devastating impact illegal fishing is having on island states due to gun-running and drug trafficking by international criminal networks in the fishing industry.
- Illicit fishing operations rely on a range of tactics and loopholes in international law to get their products to market. Ports known for lax enforcement or limited inspection capacity are a prime pathway for unethical fishermen and companies to move their catch from ship to shelf.
- On the 5th June 2016 the Port States Measures Agreement (PSMA) to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate IUU fishing finally came into force following its adoption in 2009 the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.
- It is a key weapon in the arsenal needed to fight illegal fishing, stopping IUU fishers moving their catch from ship to shelf and illegal fish making its way onto our plates.
- Foreign-flagged IUU fishing vessels, as well as transport and support vessels, will now have a harder time offloading their illegal catch in countries that have ratified the agreement, due to increased inspection in ports and the refusal of port entry or access to port services including the landing, transshipment, processing and packaging of seafood.

## **WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?**

- IUU fishing is an environmental, economic and social problem that can be solved. There may not be a single simple solution, but concerted action and leadership from key market states can get the robbers that are stealing the world’s fish out of the water.

- We need to turn the lights on and make it impossible for IUU fishing vessels to hide in the dark. That means increased transparency within the fishing industry and by countries so that vessel data is made public and shared openly to help ensure full traceability of all fish and seafood from boat to plate.
- It's time to use new technology for good and work with the tech sector to put 'eyes in the skies' that enable cooperation and collaboration among authorities as well as to enable those who sell fish to track it back to its source; ensure that national and international laws are abided by and that no fishing is taking place within marine reserves.
- Every commercial fishing vessel, just like every commercial maritime vessel [and commercial airliner] should have a unique vessel identifier which stays with it from the time it is built until it is scrapped. Every mobile phone has one, every automobile has one, so there's no reason for huge industrial fishing vessels - or even small-scale vessels - to be exempt from such a requirement.
- Coastal nations should require the use of tracking systems by all vessels operating in their waters and actively penalize those violating the law; and purveyors of seafood should require that what they sell can be traced from ship to shelf -including requirements for information that prevent modern slavery. Those fishing the high seas should be required to track and report their activities in real-time and provide it publicly. Where legislative and enforcement efforts fail, market incentives can pick up the slack.
- IUU operators should have nowhere to sell their catch. Seafood suppliers, which hold much of the power in today's seafood supply chain, should use tracking systems like AIS and VMS, to supplement existing traceability standards. Suppliers should only source fish from vessels that can consistently verify the origin of their catches and ethical fishing practices.
- Industry, government, fishing interests and the general public should be able to view the activities of commercial fishing vessels and can do so using free tools like Global Fishing Watch and others. [Global Fishing Watch](#) aims to shine a spotlight on the Ocean by tracking and sharing data.
- See this report by the [Environmental Justice Foundation](#) (EJF) '[Out of the shadows](#)' that sets out 10 global principles for transparency in fisheries.
- Cooperation between and beyond fisheries authorities, international enforcement operations like INTERPOL, and using technology better can beat this scourge. It is important also to keep information on the [FAO Global Record of Fishing Vessels](#) and through the work of organisations like [Trygg Mat Tracking](#), ensure up-to-date lists of fishing licenses and authorizations, vessel

registries, human trafficking and other related crimes, and information on arrests and sanctions for IUU fishing activities.

- Having more countries ratify and implement key international agreements such as the Port State Measures Agreement, the International Labour Organization Work in Fishing Convention (C188) and the IMO Cape Town Agreement on crew safety on fishing vessels.
- The World Trade Organization must agree in 2020 on how to get rid of harmful fisheries subsidies that contribute to overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.
- Banning transshipments at sea, unless effective and rigorous controls are in place, such as the presence of inspectors or qualified independent fisheries observers on board vessels to monitor activities.
- Increasing the incentives to take action and sanction IUU operators and those who support their activities by closing off access to key markets and ports and securing effective prosecutions of the true owners of the vessels.