

ILLEGAL, UNREPORTED, & UNREGULATED FISHING OVERVIEW

A NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing exacerbates poverty, threatens livelihoods, and fosters food insecurity. These impacts are especially detrimental to developing countries that rely heavily on marine ecosystems for subsistence and employment. Resources derived from IUU fishing are typically exported away from communities already on the margins of society and into developed countries. Once the illegal catch is brought to shore and processed, the fish products are shipped and sold in overseas markets. Between 20-32% of wild-caught seafood in the United States of America is illegal.

Not only does overfishing from illicit actors exacerbate food insecurity, but it also subjects marginalized communities to human rights abuses within the fishing industry, including substandard working conditions and human trafficking. IUU fishing activities pose a significant national security threat by enabling other illicit activities such as money laundering, drug smuggling, illegal arms dealing, and other transnational organized crimes.

The U.S. Coast Guard identified IUU fishing as the leading global maritime security threat due to the expected deterioration of government authority within fragile coastal States and increased tension between fishing nations. Without U.S. and international efforts to stop illegal fishing, the tension among nations could threaten geopolitical stability worldwide.

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STATE OF THE OCEAN

In 2017, fish consumption accounted for 17% of the global population's intake of animal protein. More than 3 billion people rely on wild-caught and farmed seafood as their primary source of protein. Further, about 12% of the world's population—over 870 million people—depend on fisheries and aquaculture to support their livelihoods. However, fish populations and marine ecosystems are increasingly at risk of exploitation and degradation. Overfishing, climate change, ocean acidification, and habitat deterioration threaten already fragile marine ecosystems. IUU fishing activity threatens marine ecosystems by undermining efforts to manage fisheries and conserve marine biodiversity sustainably. Due to challenges in identifying, detecting, and quantifying the scope of IUU fishing practices, this problem has proved difficult to combat.

Alyssa Withrow - November 2021





IMPACTS OF IUU FISHING

FOOD SECURITY

IUU fishing contributes to the depletion of fish stocks and prevents sustainable fishing regulations from being effective. Driven by population growth, a growing middle class, and increasing pressure on global food supplies due to climate change, demand for fish protein continues to grow. To support the estimated population of 9.7 billion people by 2050 would require an increase in food supply by 25-70%. In 2017, fish consumption accounted for 17% of the global population's intake of animal protein. The average per capita fish intake as the primary source of animal proteins is highest, reaching over 50%, in Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Gambia, Ghana, Indonesia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and several small island developing States. However, as fish are increasingly sought after, the fish stocks upon which we rely are dwindling.

SOCIOECONOMIC

Many of the most overfished fish stocks are located off the coast of developed countries, such as the United States and China. As a result of overfishing in their domestic waters, developed nations have expanded their distant water fishing (DWF) fleets to sustain their fishing economies in foreign waters. The most biologically productive fisheries are located around the coastlines of developing countries and within their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). These developing countries do not have the same technology and industrial fleets to compete with the DWF fleets from foreign countries, and they rely more heavily on fish protein for subsistence. Despite the harm caused to the local economy and fishers, governments grant fishing access and licenses to the DWF fleets. When faced with the competition of industrial fishing fleets, some subsistence fishermen are forced to resort to less sustainable, often illegal, fishing practices to support their livelihoods and feed their families.

SOVEREIGNTY

While a fight over limited resources motivates bad actors to engage in IUU fishing, corruption and ease of evading detection have allowed IUU fishing to flourish. The international nature of the fishing industry, the vastness of the ocean, the presence of legitimate fishing vessels, and the distribution network for fish and fishing products create the perfect opportunity to evade authorities.

Money laundering and tax crimes impact economies, but they are not the only criminal activities associated with IUU fishing. Corruption and lack of monitoring, control, and surveillance capacity enable human trafficking, drug smuggling, and wildlife trafficking. The lack of monitoring capacity in many countries means that ships are not at risk of being caught for criminal activity such as IUU fishing and associated human rights abuses.



ESSENTIAL INTERVENTIONS TO COMBAT IUU FISHING



ENFORCEMENT

Currently, the rewards of engaging in illegal activities in the fishing industry far outweigh the risks of being caught and the penalties of prosecution. Increased monitoring, control and surveillance capacity, in addition to more effective enforcement and prosecution, is necessary to combat illicit activity at sea.

TRACEABILITY

Adopting more robust requirements for imported seafood in the U.S. would encourage nations worldwide to strengthen their fisheries management and reporting requirements and hold imported seafood to the same standard as the U.S. caught seafood. The U.S. has the opportunity to lead on IUU fishing issues by expanding the Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP) and adopting legislation like the Illegal Fishing and Forced Labor Prevention Act. These actions would ensure that all seafood in U.S. markets is safe, properly labeled, legally caught, and humanely sourced.

COLLABORATION

Many NGOs, private organizations, and governments are working on innovative and technical strategies to combat IUU fishing domestically and internationally. Tackling IUU fishing requires teamwork and collaboration amongst various sectors to pull resources, ideas, knowledge, and expertise together. Collaboration can range from intelligence sharing and legislative development to creative private efforts like providing vessels to countries for joint at-sea patrol. Expanding partnerships with NGOs and private organizations can increase capacity significantly for less well-resourced states.

