

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing Regional Overview



ARCTIC OCEAN

Geography

The U.S., Canada, Denmark, Greenland, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, and Russia all have territories that border the Arctic Ocean. Home to more than four million people and forty indigenous ethnic groups, the Arctic has historically been covered by a layer of sea-ice that expands during winters and contracts during summers, but thawing permafrost and ice sheet degradation are changing the landscape. The Arctic seafloor largely retains its nutrient-rich waters due to a deep basin surrounded by land and shallow channels, resulting in a robust and productive marine environment. The principal targets of Arctic IUU fishing include Polar Cod, Haddock, and King Crab.

 60 percent of all seafood caught in the U.S. originates from Alaskan waters, generating billions of dollars in revenue each year.

 The Arctic will be seasonally ice-free by 2035, offering access to unspoiled fishing grounds. As global fish stocks deplete, the pressure to overexploit this fragile ecosystem will mount.

Strategic Significance

The Polar Silk Road remains a prominent element of Chinese foreign policy and consists of Arctic shipping routes that connect North America, East Asia, and Western Europe through the Arctic Circle. These emerging shipping lanes, combined with fossil fuel extraction already inflict a great deal of harm to fish habitats. Similarly, China has declared itself a "near-Arctic state" with growing ambitions in the region, making the Arctic a critical component in strategic competition. The anticipated arrival of Chinese distant water fleets and Arctic-adjacent fishing fleets as a result of expanding ocean access will exacerbate the region's environmental degradation, especially as alternative oceans are overfished. Although the Arctic has traditionally been a unique region for international cooperation and collaboration, the warming waters are creating complex new challenges. Consequently, much like the South China Sea, the Arctic will become a flashpoint for overlapping geopolitical, resource, and commercial competition.



Credit: Erling Svensen

ARCTIC IUU CHALLENGES

Impacts on Indigenous/First Nations Communities

Approximately 500,000 indigenous and/or first nations peoples inhabit the Arctic region. There are 40 distinct groups including the Aleut, Athabaskan, Gwich'in, Sami, and Inuit peoples, that live in the circumpolar areas of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russia, Canada, Greenland, and the U.S. Although there is a wide variation in cultural and historical backgrounds of the groups, for millennium, these groups have flourished in the inhospitable climate. Many rely on fishing, sealing, whaling, and other hunting for sustenance. Rituals and traditions surrounding these activities also hold cultural significance as the groups each have a special bond with nature. In conjunction with pollution, unpredictable land and sea access, and warming ocean temperatures all resulting from climate change, Arctic and subarctic IUU fishing will exacerbate food insecurity for indigenous groups and endanger their way of life.

Environmental Destruction & Sustainable Development

As the Arctic region warms, economic and infrastructure development are likely to increase, as will military and diplomatic presence. The increase in human activities will have complex impacts on the geography of the region. Similarly, climate change has increased access to Arctic waters as well as the migration of fish stocks. In the austere Arctic marine environment, entire food chains rest on select species. Particularly, higher-order consumers such as seals, polar bears, seabirds, larger fish, and other marine mammals must compete with humans for Arctic cod, which holds vast commercial potential. This extends to the subarctic waters of the Bering Sea, where there are already fisheries for halibut, shrimp, scallops, squid, Pollock, crab, cod, pacific salmon, capelin and more. Overfishing of these species could deprive the Arctic ecosystem of its food staples, resulting in broader decline or collapse. Moreover, as climate change heats the oceans, the range of several fish stocks in places like the Bering Sea will likely extend northward, forcing fisheries to also migrate towards the Arctic. In the future, climate change may also render Russia's vast northern coastlines into viable Arctic ports, both necessitating the creation of new fisheries and further enabling their exploitation.

Russia

Russia has the longest Arctic coastline, making it a critical component of any international efforts in the region. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, key collaboration and cooperation in the region, such as Arctic Council meetings, have been suspended. Deteriorating international relationships with Russia has concerns growing that the Arctic could become the stage for a new Cold War.



Credit: Gordon Leggett

ARCTIC OCEAN KEY PARTNERS & ACTIVITIES

Regional/International

There is no singular Regional Fishery Management Organization (RFMO) that encompasses the entirety of Arctic waters. Instead, there are several different RFMOs, entities, and agreements that guide activities in different geographic regions. In addition, several other international bodies coordinate and collaborate on Arctic research and international issues, including:

- [The Arctic Council](#)
- [North Atlantic Fisheries Organization](#)
- [Arctic Economic Council](#)
- [North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission](#)
- [European Polar Board](#)
- [Northern Forum](#)
- [Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission](#)
- [The Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean](#)
- [International Arctic Science Committee](#)
- [International Maritime Organization](#)
- [Seafood Alliance for Legality and Traceability \(SALT\)](#)

United States

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) is responsible for fishery law enforcement and preventing IUU fishing in U.S. Arctic waters, but several other agencies operate IUU portfolios. All activities are guided by strategic guidance and existing legal frameworks. Examples include:

- [National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#)
- [NOAA - Fish Resources Of The Arctic Management Plan](#)
- [North Pacific Fishery Management](#)
- [U.S. Department of State Office of Marine Conservation](#)
- [U.S. Maritime Security and Fisheries Enforcement \(SAFE\) Act](#)
- [U.S. Interagency Working Group on IUU Fishing](#)
- [U.S. Coast Guard Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Strategic Outlook](#)
- [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act of 2006 \(MRSA\)](#)