

# Opinion: The practice of distant water fishing is plaguing our oceans

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## FULL TEXT

The uproar generated last year, when a flotilla of about 325 Chinese vessels were spotted fishing just outside the Galapagos sanctuary, still resonates today. What were so many Chinese vessels doing more than 9,500 miles away from their ports of reference? The nutrient-rich waters around the Ecuadorian archipelago are an excellent reason to travel so far.

Distant water fishing (DWF) refers to fishing outside one's territorial waters and allows fishing fleets to extend their operations to faraway places and sustain them for months on end. There are three main problems with DWF: the sheer scale of fishing, the lack of transparency and the connection with illegal activities.

Global fishing capacity has more than doubled since 1950, fuelled by subsidies, technological advances and hunger for fish. However, the global catch has decreased by 80%. This means that while fishing capacity is increasing, fish are in decline.

Much of the new fishing capacity is thought to be in DWF fleets that can operate far afield, often in lower-income countries' waters. The migration of fishing operations is driven by the exhaustion of fish stocks in home waters, access to cheap labour abroad, lack of monitoring and little legal risk.

Low-income countries are susceptible to hosting illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) activities in their waters due to poor governance. However, nobody knows exactly how many vessels with DWF capacity there are in the world.

Just five countries are thought to be responsible for 90 percent of DWF capacity. As Russia and European countries slowed their operations, Chinese and Taiwanese fleets have grown to become the leading fleets. A report by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) estimated that China alone has over 16,000 vessels with such capacity; in comparison, the European Union reports fewer than 300 DWF vessels.

In other words, almost all DWF is by vessels from higher-income nations. This so-called "marine colonialism" happens despite the apparent unprofitability of fishing abroad.

Rather, the global hunt for fish is driven by consumer preferences, concerns about food security, and economic and geopolitical interests –irrespective of the needs and interests of the low-income countries alongside the world's last great fisheries.

To manage their fish stocks sustainably, countries need good information about fishing practices. How many fish are being caught? How large are those fish? Which species are being caught as bycatch? These data can inform science-based quotas for fishing fleets and effective enforcement by domestic agencies.

But fishing data is often unreliable. Operators can accidentally or intentionally mis-invoice or underreport their catches. The rise of DWFs further undermines this effort, as they may not report their catches locally and fish may travel long distances to markets.

DWF operators are often enabled through opaque bilateral agreements between their host countries and developing nations. The secrecy of these agreements makes it impossible to monitor them. As Global Financial Integrity reports, some authorities are turning "a blind eye" due to different factors, including corruption and

“checkbook diplomacy,” where fisheries’ access is traded for development projects. This creates conditions for illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

In a 2018 report, ODI explored current efforts to support monitoring and enforcement of fisheries, including using new resources such as big datasets, satellite imagery and machine learning. So far, there is no single, public global fisheries information tool.

Private initiatives tackling IUU fishing have seen their potential undermined by the limited size and insufficient quality of their datasets and lack of collaboration. Automatic identification systems (AIS) data - a tracking system that records dynamic vessel information as it moves from one place to another - are useful, but vessels can withhold AIS data to hide their operations.

DWF fleets are often connected with illicit activities ranging from fishing in other nations’ waters without approval, vessels misrepresenting their fishing activity or fishing to the detriment of an ecosystem.

Whilst exclusive economic zones protect the waters within 200 nautical miles of the coast, ships outside of these zones escape local jurisdictions as they are in international waters. A ship in international waters is governed by the laws of the country to which they are registered. As a result, a Chinese or Russian ship just outside Ecuador’s or Senegal’s exclusive economic zone is governed by Chinese or Russian law –which has scant respect for the diets or jobs of local fishing communities.

Many DWF vessels choose a flag of convenience. In this case, they are registered with one country but owned by citizens of another country. The biggest registries –including Panama, Liberia, and the Marshall Islands, which concentrate 40 percent of the world’s fleet –generate a stream of profits from these fleets but exert little oversight. Opaque registration and ownership structures allow money laundering and other illicit activities to go unchecked. A 2019 C4ADS investigation of 29 IUU fishing networks indicated that 60 percent of IUU fishing intersected with customs fraud, human trafficking, drug-trafficking, organised crime, money laundering or tax evasion.

IUU fishing harms ecologies, livelihoods, and the food security of coastal communities, which “bear the greatest burden” of IUU fishing. Economic loss from IUU equals tens of billions of pounds yearly, including lost tax revenue, onshore fishing industry jobs, and depletion of food supplies. An ODI report in 2016 estimated that, with the right policies to limit IUU fishing, more than 300,000 much-needed new jobs could be created in West Africa.

The combination of the scale of fishing and lack of transparency is catastrophic, enabling overfishing and a range of illegal activities. Ecuador recently seized shark fins from 30,000 killed sharks destined to Asian markets. In some Latin American countries, local populations of valued species like squid and sea cucumber are being annihilated. Excess DWF capacity is employed to remove competition from the oceans; some species such as dolphins are being decimated.

The solutions are, firstly, greater transparency and monitoring to inform a response. Secondly, a drastic reduction of the fleets –especially the megafleets from China and other fishing nations. Finally, severe persecution of IUU activity, making it too risky to partake in. Action has been postponed as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, but time is running out for fish stocks and fishing communities.

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