



Trawling boat out at sea  
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## Illegal Fishing by Another Name Smells too Sweet

I'm writing this on a plane home from the Netherlands, where I attended a conference sponsored by the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research and the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement. Why, you may ask, did these two very different organizations co-sponsor a conference? It was to discuss and closely examine the relationship between illegal fishing and the ecosystems and food security of developing countries. The conference brought together experts from disciplines that rarely collaborate, namely fisheries scientists and criminologists. It caused me to consider how and why we — in the conservation community — need to increase our focus on illegal fishing as a stand-alone issue.

### IUU VS. ILLEGAL FISHING

In the ocean conservation world, you will often hear about “IUU fishing,” which stands for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. It was created to shed light on the scale of “off-the-books” fisheries. The conference made clear, however, that the term IUU has long outlived its usefulness. IUU has too often been used as a synonym for “illegal,” and has consequently conflated criminal activities with fisheries management issues including what may be the simple non-reporting of catches from perfectly legal fisheries. Illegal fishing is a crime and as such must be dealt with by law enforcement institutions rather than lumped together with fishery management problems. It's not an issue of fishery management any more than car theft is an issue for car mechanics. We now have other ways, such as new data on the Sea Around Us website, to emphasize the (very large) scale of other forms of off-the-books fishing.

The crime of illegal fishing directly affects food security in developing countries. For example, when Russian industrial vessels illegally target sardines off Senegal in Northwest Africa, they catch a fish that is also sought after by the local, canoe-based artisanal fishery. This fishery in turn supplies local processors who dry the sardines and send them inland where they represent a unique source of animal protein and micronutrients.

Illegal fishing not only threatens food security, it also threatens the very biodiversity upon which functioning marine ecosystems depend. A Chinese fleet operating off Mauritania, another Northwest African country with extremely productive waters, illegally catches seabirds (yes, seabirds!) such as the Northern gannet, in addition to targeting the fish for which they have presumably paid an “access fee.” We know this because in 2013 Mauritanian inspectors found a Chinese fishing vessel with boxes labeled “corvina,” which are also known as croakers or weakfish. The boxes actually contained frozen gannets ready to thaw and cook.

### FEWER FISH, MORE CRIME

The decline of fish stocks worldwide has spurred some unscrupulous fleet owners to reduce the cost of fishing through illegal means. These criminal workarounds include using flags of convenience for their vessels — registering the ship to another country or “flag,” which may enable a ship to bypass oversight and regulations — or illegally accessing fish by not paying for fishing rights in a coastal nation's Exclusive Economic Zone. The owners and officers of vessels involved in illegal fishing are too often also

involved in other illegal activities such as drug running, wildlife and human trafficking or human rights violations against their semi-enslaved crew. So, as many of the criminologists at the conference pointed out: Suppressing illegal fishing helps reduce associated criminal activities as well.

As a result, the many national and international NGOs that increasingly deal with illegal fishing must begin to focus on the role that states and intergovernmental organizations such as Interpol, the International Maritime Organization and the International Labor Organization play in combating illegal fishing. The efforts of NGOs may not be enough to crack a criminal enterprise, but a determined state prosecutor — especially one who gets information from NGOs — can be. Global Fishing Watch and other data-based projects from the nonprofit sector are an excellent start to ensuring that the information needed to find and track illegal fishing is made available to the right individuals, authorities and institutions.

This last point seems crucial to me. It's time to move beyond discussing how awful “IUU fishing” is and to start assisting the parts of government — namely law enforcement authorities and the judiciary — that can help to address the “illegal” or criminal enterprise present in this acronym. Doing so will help us all to save the oceans and feed the world.



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