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PLUS: GLOBAL FISHING WATCH | OCEANA LAUNCHES IN CANADA | Q&A WITH LASSE GUSTAVSSON



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ASK DR. PAULY

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What is IUU?

IUU is a widely used acronym, at least in the world of fishing; it pertains to Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing or catches. This definition of IUU, however, requires that we also define its three components, as they have particular meanings that are slightly different from their meaning in non-fisheries contexts.

Thus, the illegal part of IUU in fisheries refers largely to international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which makes it illegal for the vessel of a given country to operate without explicit permission (i.e. an “access agreement”) in the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of another country. Thus, the ‘I’ in IUU does not usually cover the vessels of a given country breaking the rules (i.e., fisheries regulations) in their own country’s EEZ.

Similarly, “unreported” fishing generally refers to fishing in the High Sea (the offshore region beyond the EEZs, covering 60 percent of the Earth’s oceans). High Sea fishing, which is not covered by UNCLOS, is partly governed by a small number of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs). An example of an RFMO is the controversial International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT), which has earned a dubious reputation for largely failing in the mission implied in its name. RFMOs attempt to regulate the fisheries of their members, mostly distant-

water fishing countries (Spain, Japan, South Korea, the U.S., etc.) by catch quota, that is by setting overall limits of the species in their remit that their members can catch, and allocating the quota among its members. However, member countries can opt out of these decisions and land catches that are not reported to RFMOs. Their catch, in this case, becomes “unreported” (though not “illegal”) — which takes care of the first ‘U’ of IUU.

The second ‘U’ of IUU refers to “unregulated,” which itself refers to fishing vessels operating in the High Sea area regulated by a given RFMO without obvious flag or flying the flag of a country that is not member of that RFMO, and thus not bound to its rules (remember: this is the High Sea, where almost anything goes!). The operation and catch of these vessels will be “unregulated.”

The acronym IUU is now widely used, often thoughtlessly — notably by staff of environmental NGOs as synonymous of “illegal.” This is misleading, as not reporting catches and fishing without being regulated by an RFMO is not illegal. In fact, using the term “IUU” instead of “illegal” obscures the fact that the Law of the Sea needs further development, such as to cover the High Seas.

The above definitions of the Us of IUU illustrate the primary concerns of industrial tuna fisheries, as practiced by countries with distant-water,

High-Seas fisheries. However, over 90 percent of the world fishery catches occur not on the high seas. They are instead within the EEZs of maritime countries. This catch is underreported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations because the majority of its member countries tend to under-report their catch (for reasons that will have to be explained in another column). This is particularly true for the catches of small-scale coastal fisheries, conducted by millions of artisanal and subsistence fishers, which are usually not reported to the statistical office of their country.

Being perceived as nonexistent both by their national governments and the FAO, and the international community, small-scale fisheries are thus largely unregulated, and thus end up overfishing their resource base.

This is, by far, a more important issue for food security and the conservation of marine biodiversity than the supply of industry-caught tuna to a few rich countries. Thus, because it is loaded with too much baggage and usually used imprecisely, I now avoid the use of eye-you-you, and I urge the reader to do the same.