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THE PERFECT PROTEIN

A new book from Oceana
CEO Andy Sharpless

PLUS

CHILE'S REMOTE TREASURES

INSIDE SEAFOOD FRAUD

SAVING GREAT WHITES



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ASK DR. PAULY

What are distant-water fishing fleets, and how do they affect overfishing?

Distant-water fishing fleets are the fishing vessels that operate within the 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of other countries, and less often further offshore, in what is known as the high seas. The flags that these vessels fly are important here, because there are countries – Belize, Liberia and Panama come to mind – that will lend them so-called ‘flags of convenience’ for a few bucks. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), distant-water fleets must be offered to take the ‘surplus’ of fish not caught by a given country in its EEZ, against a fee that is part of a negotiated ‘access agreement.’

After World War II, the US had a large distant-water tuna fleet in the Eastern Pacific, but no agreements were needed then, as there was no UNCLOS and no EEZs. Then Japan, the USSR (remember?) and its successor republics followed, notably Russia and the Ukraine, along with South Korea, Taiwan, Spain and France. These fleets quickly acquired questionable reputations as they often were found to deploy illegal gears, or catching

amounts of fish above the agreed quota. In addition, negotiated access agreements, when they do exist, tend to award a paltry 5 percent or less of the landed value of the fish that is caught.

China’s distant-water fleets, which began their build-up around 1985, are no exception to this. Also, they are huge, operate largely without access agreements (or under access agreements that are secret, thus we don’t even know if their catch is legal or not), and they are completely undocumented, i.e., Chinese authorities are not publishing catch statistics or evaluations of the stocks exploited by their fleets.

Thus, there are good reasons to think that China’s distant-water fleets, legally or not, catch well above the surplus in the countries where they operate. This is particularly acute in Africa where Chinese distant-water fleets are highly active, and where they directly compete with local artisanal fisheries, causing unemployment and endangering the long-term food security of the local populations. 🐟