

RED FISH, COUP FISH

China has fished itself out of its own waters, so Chinese fishermen are now sticking their rods in other nations' seas

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The [growth of China's middle class](#) over the past 15 years or so has driven up demand for all sorts of luxury goods in the country. For example, there's been a growing interest in [high-quality seafood](#)—which comes at a most inopportune time.

Efforts to boost China's marine economy in recent decades, including offshore drilling and unsustainable fishing practices like trawling, has

resulted in a dramatic depletion of its own fishing stock. Efforts have been made in response to this environmental damage: Since the 1990s, Beijing [has implemented](#) an annual summer moratorium on fishing in the South China Sea, and agriculture minister Han Changfu recently [announced](#) plans to cut back on the size of the world's largest fishing fleet to protect its stocks. (China's Ministry of Agriculture did not respond to a request for comment.)

But in order to sate its population's rising desire for nice pieces of fish—and to continue exporting seafood abroad to trading nations—the Middle Kingdom's fishing vessels have resorted to catch throughout the high seas (i.e., international waters) and, possibly through illegal practices, in other countries' coastal domains.

In 2016, a number of Chinese fishing vessels were shot at for fishing in other nations' exclusive economic zones, areas of water off countries' coastlines where those countries have sole rights to pursue economic activity. In March 2016, [Argentinian patrol units sank](#) the Chinese fishing boat *Lu Yan Yuan Yu 010* as it attempted to flee into international waters after allegedly trawling illegally off the coast of the Argentinian city Puerto Madryn. Recently, in light of illegal Chinese vessels draining the supply of fish, Somali fishermen [have turned](#) to piracy. And in November 2016, members of the South Korean coast guard opened fire on two Chinese fishing vessels that had [threatened to ram](#) patrol boats in the Yellow Sea near Incheon—not a month after Chinese fishermen rammed and sank a South Korean speedboat in the same area.



South Korean marines and navy soldiers on a boat conduct a crackdown against China's illegal fishing in neutral waters around Ganghwa island, South Korea. (The South Korean Defense Ministry via AP)

[Reporters](#) have drawn connections between the string of South Korean skirmishes and political tension around the South China Sea (China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and Malaysia all have claims over parts of this body of water). But it's also clear Chinese fishermen are desperate for new sources of fresh catch. Within China's own exclusive economic zone, the nation has lost "one-half of its coastal wetlands, 57% of mangroves, and 80% of coral reefs, most of which are critical spawning, nursing, or feeding grounds for fish," [according to a 2016 study](#) undertaken by a team of international experts.

That's thanks to trawling, a practice in which fishermen drag long nets along the ocean floor and kill practically any living thing in their path. In addition to destroying coral reefs and the habitats necessary for healthy ocean wildlife populations, fishermen discard the bycatch, the

sea creatures accidentally trapped in their nets. This unintended catch can include endangered species like sea turtles, as well as “trash fish,” species of edible fish that many in China (and in other countries) do not want to eat. (Some Chinese fishermen try to turn a profit off their bycatch, trading trash fish to West African citizens in exchange for labor or selling them to fish meal processors in China; sea turtles, on the other hand, can be sold on the black market in the mainland.) Many nations have taken steps to impede bottom trawling, largely because it is a disaster for marine ecosystems. For example, Chile [permanently banned](#) this fishing method in 2015, while other countries like Indonesia have [imposed limited bans](#).

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) the world’s commercial fish stocks that exist at biologically sustainable levels has declined from 90% in 1974 to 68.6% in 2013. In other words, nearly one-third of global commercial fish stocks are already being overfished.

In the same 2016 report, the FAO [noted](#) that in 2014, China accounted for just over 18% of the global marine catch; by 2030, China is [projected](#) to account for 38% of global marine catch, more than double any other region (the FAO counts China as a single region—the others are Europe and Central Asia; North America; Latin America and Caribbean; Japan; “other East Asia and the Pacific”; Southeast Asia; India; “other South Asia”; Middle East and North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; and the “rest of the world”).

During a 2013 visit to Tanmen, a fishing village on Hainan island in the South China Sea, Chinese president Xi Jinping [urged](#) his nation's fishermen to "build bigger ships and venture even farther into the oceans and catch bigger fish." Chinese fishermen took these messages to heart. They upped their distant-water fishing—sourcing catches out on the high seas and in the commercial fishing territories of other countries.

According to a 2016 [report](#) by the environmental watchdog organization Greenpeace, the Middle Kingdom's total number of fishing boats sailing on the high seas and in other countries' coastal areas runs just under 2,500. That's [approximately](#) 10 times the size of the entire US distant water commercial fishing fleet.

A country can draw up agreements to allow other nations' fishermen to catch "surplus" stock in their exclusive economic zones, and China likely has [many of these](#) in place, including with Mauritania, Senegal, and Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, according to the Wilson Center, a Washington, DC-based independent research firm.

But a 2016 paper [published](#) in Nature Communications found that China has been disguising the total amount of fish caught by its distant-water fishing fleets. In its reports to the FAO [dating](#) as far back as the 1980s, the study found, Beijing would overstate the number of fish caught within its own exclusive economic zone, while underreporting how much was caught far away. They can get away with it because the agreements drafted to allow Chinese vessels to fish in other countries' economic zones are not available to the public, and

the only way to determine whether the fishing was illegal is to bring the accused to court.

From 2000 to 2011, China officially reported 368,000 tons of fish caught per year, on average, outside its domestic fishing areas. But a 2013 [study](#) that analyzed [catch counts](#) of Chinese fishing vessels in international zones from “scientific literature, mass media, [and] websites of both governmental and non-governmental organizations” with field observations and interviews came up with a much different number: 3.1 million tons or more of fish per year in the same time frame, nearly 10 times what China was reporting to the FAO. Based on the data available, the researchers believe the uncounted catch is predominantly coming from Chinese fishermen scraping West African nations’ ocean floors.

In addition to overfishing these countries’ waters, China’s industrial trawlers are likely having a devastating environmental impact on anywhere they travel. Rashid Kang, head of Greenpeace East Asia’s China Ocean Campaign, says though it’s hard to determine whether or not Chinese fishing boats are the main cause of fishing stock decline throughout West Africa in recent decades—other possible contributing factors include excessive fishing by commercial fishing fleets from other nations and by local fishermen—it’s likely China’s industrial trawlers have contributed by damaging the coastal habitat and their ecosystem.

“Fish are getting harder to catch,” says Kang. Local fishermen in countries like Senegal, Mauritania, and Guinea “used to go out for half a day, but now they have to go out for days to catch their supply.”



One mans trash fish... (Reuters/Pascal Rossignol)

A 1998 [paper](#) in *Conservation Biology* found that when a trawl net scrapes the bottom of the ocean floor, it kills off many “benthic organisms”—the living creatures living on the seafloor that serve as feed for fish like tuna. And because these ecosystems have a slow recovery time, continuous trawling prevents them from redeveloping after initial damage. Decimating the source of nutrition for organisms higher up in the food chain eventually causes those animals to die off as well.

Back home, China’s middle class’s appetite for high-quality fish like salmon is sated indirectly by these distant water fleets. Much of the

salmon purchased in the local market comes from aquaculture—fish raised in freshwater farms. That sounds nice and sustainable, until you hear how that salmon is fed.

A 2017 study [published](#) in *Fish and Fisheries* found that China hauls in more fish catch for non-human consumption than any other country in the world. This catch is typically converted into fishmeal and fish oil, used to feed aquaculture fish. According to Richard Brubaker, the founder of Collective Responsibility, a sustainability-focused strategic advisory firm, the demand for aquaculture is “wiping out a lot of these [fishing] stocks to feed fish, fish.”

“For every pound [of farm-raised salmon] you create, you need two to three pounds of raw fish to feed fish,” says Brubaker. “It’s a losing battle, and they’re going farther and farther to get their fish.

At the moment, there are no straightforward solutions. In a 2016 report, [Greenpeace laid out one option](#) (pdf): if China’s government cut back on subsidies to private companies responsible for distant-water fishing fleets, they could mitigate the damage. Without subsidies that lower the cost of things like fuel and the design of fishing vessels, the distant-fishing business would be significantly less profitable, if not negative sum, endeavor, Greenpeace writes.

Dirk Zeller, a senior scientist and executive director of the “Sea Around Us” project at the University of British Columbia and the lead author on the paper that found the discrepancy between China’s FAO numbers and likely actual distant-water catch, is not optimistic.

“[China] needs to maintain its economy, and fishing is a large part of that,” says Zeller. “Sustainability is not something in their agenda.”

Link: <https://qz.com/948980/china-has-fished-itself-out-of-its-own-waters-so-chinese-fishermen-are-now-sticking-their-rods-in-other-nations-seas/>