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Illegal on the net

bcc - February 27, 2020



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The fans threaten to take themselves out of the game

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Because they do not register their catches in the countries in whose waters they cast their nets, many industrial fishing fleets operate on a criminal basis. This statement is made by Rashid Sumaila and Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver together with colleagues in the renowned science journal Science Advances.

A total of about 7.7 to 14 million tons of fish are taken out of the sea without the knowledge of the responsible authorities, they estimate researchers. "This amount adds to the roughly 90 million tons of legal and reported catches each year," says fishing expert Catherine Zucco from the WWF nature conservation organization in Hamburg.

Researchers in Canada base their estimates on a comparison to illegal timber harvesting, which is much better documented. Since catches at sea are easier to transport and hide than

wood in the forest and the researchers estimated it very carefully anyway, the actual values could also be significantly higher, suggest Daniel Pauly and his colleagues.

The researchers estimate that a total of 8.9 to 17, 2 billion US dollars are earned from these illegal and unregistered catches. Affected states lose \$ 2.2 to \$ 4.3 billion in tax revenue annually. The countries of Africa alone lose between 7.6 and 13, US \$ 9 billion in economic output each year, report Daniel Pauly and his colleagues. Much of it is caused by industrial fishing, which mostly comes from abroad.

For Asia the loss is even higher in the year: 10, 3 to 20, \$ 3 billion. South America follows in third place with between one and 2.3 billion euros. Together, Asia, Africa and South America therefore record 85 percent of this worldwide loss due to illegal and unregistered catches.

But how does fishing work? Eyes of the authorities? "In the European Union there is, for example, the landing requirement, according to which species that have been caught online and for which there are quotas must not be thrown back into the sea, but brought ashore and counted against the catch of the fisherman," explains Catherine Zucco.

This regulation is very important because fish that are too small and unwanted species are often caught. If the fisherman throws this bycatch back into the sea, the animals are often already dead or do not survive long. However, because this regulation is hardly monitored, many by-catches are still thrown overboard. "Surveillance cameras on board and sensors on the networks could prevent such practices," explains Catherine Zucco.

Dolphins fall victim to legal and illegal fishing

Dolphins are also repeatedly removed from the nets and thrown back into the water. France's Atlantic coast is particularly affected. Dead dolphins are washed up here again and again. The Pelagis Observatory counted around 670 dead animals on the beaches until last weekend. That was more than in the same period last year, it said.

Last winter the number of dolphins washed up dead had reached record levels and caused dismay. This year, the coasts of the Bay of Biscay are the most affected – in particular the

departments of Vendée and Brittany, according to the scientist Matthieu Authier from the University of La Rochelle, who also works for Pelagis.

Many the traces of fishing gear are visible, they are most likely bycatch by fishermen, according to Pelagis. The scientists are concerned that a large part of the animals killed are not washed up on land at all, but sink to the bottom of the sea – so the number of dead dolphins is likely to be much larger. It is estimated that more than 11000 dolphins died off the coast of France in 2019 in the year.

Scientists and animal welfare organizations blame too tight a network of fishermen for the death of the dolphins. The animal rights activists of the Sea Shepherd organization accuse the fishing associations of a “scandalous attitude” that tarnishes the entire profession, as it says in a message.

These catches made outside the law are added to the legal ones. If catch quotas are set, the unregistered catches are missing and the fish stocks in the sea can be significantly overestimated. This increases the risk of a recession: the correct fishermen then catch less than hoped for, their profits shrink and unemployment threatens. Overall, a few enrich themselves at the expense of the general public, summarize Daniel Pauly and his colleagues this approach.

The WWF and other conservationists use satellite data, for example, to investigate these illegal activities evaluate the “Automatic Identification System” AIS. These mini-computers radio the name, size and position of the ship to better prevent collisions between ships. This data is also evaluated by a satellite fleet in space, which provides an overview of the activities of the ships at sea.

Since a ship travels completely differently when catching tuna than when catching cod or pears with a trawl net, conservationists can, for example, deduce the type of catch. “But we achieve a lot more transparency on the high seas,” explains Catherine Zucco. *(with dpa)*

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