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Counting the cost of fish fraud: 'Billions' lost to illicit fisheries

By Katy Askew

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Fish fraud is big business, new research finds Pic: Gettyimages-Kitzcorner

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Fresh research has concluded that 'billions' are lost annually due to illegal fishing.

A study has concluded between eight and 14 million tonnes of unreported fish catches are traded illicitly each year, depriving the legitimate market for seafood of between \$9bn and \$17bn in trade.

The research, from the University of British Columbia, looked at catch losses for 143 countries and found 'significant amounts' of seafood are being taken out of the regulated food supply chain.

"The overall economic impact related to the diversion of fish from the legitimate trade system is costing us \$26 billion to \$50 billion globally," said Rashid Sumaila, lead author and professor in the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries and the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs.

The researchers suggested the problem is having a disproportionate impact on the nutritional security and economic wellbeing of countries in Asia, Africa and South America.

"The substantial economic effects of the illicit trade in marine fish catch is affecting countries in Asia, Africa and South America who can hardly afford this loss. Those three geographic regions combined account for around 85% of total catch losses to illicit trade globally," Sumaila revealed.

According to Sumaila, the processing of these illegal catches often takes place offshore – and this further negative implications for local economies. "Such catches are often processed aboard large foreign industrial trans-shipment vessels, and directly shipped overseas without unloading and processing in host countries, thereby depriving local economies of revenue, income, jobs, and economic impacts."



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Depleting fish stocks

Co-author Daniel Pauly suggested that illegal fishing makes the sustainable management of fish stocks challenging.

"Many species of fish are targeted by industrial fishing fleets including illegal, unreported and unregulated vessels," said Pauly. "Illicit trade in fish and seafood products contributes to the depletion of a region's fish stocks."

Pauly, the principle investigator for the Sea Around Us – an initiative that assesses the impact of fisheries on marine ecosystems – said that this compounds problems caused by the seafood sector. "The Sea Around Us research has shown that fish catches are already vastly under reported, and if the catches that enter illicit trade are not also accounted for, we are moving closer and closer to wholesale depletion of this resource."

The 'urgent' need for transparency

The researchers said that the global nature of the seafood supply chain and widespread illegal practices mean that increased transparency is 'urgently' needed.

This must include whole-of-industry supply chain accountability, the paper suggested.

Further action should include ratifying and enforcing of various existing international agreements, addressing fish 'laundering' via trans-shipment operations, granting fishing access permission only to vessels that are insured by marine insurance companies with the ability to exclude blacklisted vessels through transparent due diligence, and stepping up collaborative enforcement activities across all on-the-water activities between countries.

"Only through full accountability and public transparency can we ensure that fish resources are not only sustainably and legally caught and traded, but that the benefits of this economic activity accrue to the people and governments of each country where fisheries occur," concluded Dirk Zeller, director of the Sea Around Us and co-author of the study.

Source

Billions lost as illicit fisheries trade hurting nations who can afford it least

Science Advances

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