



# Foreign Fleets Plundered Somalia's Fish

During decades of civil war, illegal fishers ransacked the country's waters.

Authored by

by [Munyaradzi Makoni](#)

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Somalia was at war with itself. The Siad Barre government, which had taken power in a coup in 1969, fell in 1991, plunging the nation of 10 million into civil war. In the aftermath, warring warlords tore the Horn of Africa apart. And into this 3,330-kilometer-long void—the longest coastline in continental Africa—foreign fishing fleets

swarmed. [According to a new study](#), from 1950 to 2015—though mostly after 1990—foreign fleets took 2.4 million tonnes of Somalia’s fish, 80 percent more than official statistics suggested.

For years, Somalia’s subsistence and commercial fishers lost out to foreign industrial fleets from Italy, Japan, Greece, Singapore, Egypt, the former USSR, and China. Not all of the fishing was illegal, but the period was essentially a free-for-all as unlicensed foreign fleets devoured Somalia’s fish with rampant disregard for domestic and international law, says Tim Cashion, a fisheries expert with the Sea Around Us project at the University of British Columbia who worked on the new research.

Unsurprisingly, the species and number of fish being caught by Somali and foreign fishers alike was largely undocumented during this period. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, which tracks fish catches globally, was left to estimate the scale of the catch in the region, Cashion says.

To fill the gap, Cashion and others with the Sea Around Us project worked with Secure Fisheries, a program of One Earth Future, a United States foundation, to reconstruct the actual domestic and foreign fleet catch data in Somali waters from 1950 to 2015.

Digging up the missing data felt like detective work, says Dirk Zeller, the executive director of Sea Around Us. The team scoured the globe for information, going well beyond traditional fisheries science sources. They dug into reports from development agencies, human health projects, and news articles, and reached out to people who worked in Somalia at some point over the past five decades to glean any information they could.

“You feel like a literature sleuth, snooping and searching for anything suitable,” Zeller says. “Once you have amassed what you could find, it then becomes like a large puzzle.”

The easy pieces represented by the official data made up the corners and outside frame of the puzzle, Zeller says. That set the scene within which the team gradually evaluated additional information to see where it might fit. Over time, they assembled the whole puzzle.

The work resulted in the first accurate time series of total domestic and foreign fisheries catches in Somalia, Cashion says. “Not only does this research give a more accurate picture of how much was caught, but also what was caught by whom,” he says.

Somali has had an internationally recognized federal government for five years, and Cashion says the reconstructed catch data should give the country a better understanding of past fishing activities. This could help the government devise suitable policies for domestic fisheries development and determine any access given to foreign fleets. Foreign licensing would generate income, which could help fund government programs, including fisheries management. However, it’s important to balance the need for long-term domestic food security and opportunities for domestic fishermen with short-term earnings that come from foreign licensing.

Many African nations are faced with making similar decisions about domestic versus foreign fishing access, and incomplete or missing catch data can lead to decisions that tip the scale in a detrimental way, Cashion adds.

Fisheries managers need data to guide effective fisheries policy, says Omar Mahadalle, a Somali master’s candidate in marine biology at Silliman University in the Philippines. But Somalia doesn’t have professionals to perform data collection, analyses, and processing, he says. In the absence of effective fisheries policy and enforcement capability, the benefit to be gained from this new data could be limited. “That does not stop the study being considered as a reference for further research,” he adds.

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Munyaradzi Makoni is a freelance science journalist from Zimbabwe who lives in Cape Town. He writes about agriculture, climate change, environment, marine sciences, health, higher education, sustainable development, and science in general. He was Canada’s International Development Research Centre-Research Africa science journalism fellow in 2012. His journalism work has appeared in various media organizations including Africa Renewal, Forskning & Framsteg, Intellectual Property Watch, IPS, SciDev.net, Thomson Reuters Foundation, and University World News among others.



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