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New data trove shows the huge imprint of fishing across the world's oceans

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Humans are now fishing at least 55 percent of the world's oceans - an area four times larger than that occupied by onshore agriculture.

That startling statistic is among the findings of a unique, high-tech collaboration that is providing a massive amount of new data about global fishing operations.

The results, published Thursday in the journal *Science*, offer a powerful glimpse of the problem of overfishing on the hard-to-regulate high seas. According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, 31.4 percent of global fish stocks were overfished or fished unsustainably, as of 2013, while an additional 58.1 percent were "fully fished."

Thursday's findings relied on data from Global Fishing Watch, a collaboration between Oceana, SkyTruth and Google. Researchers compiled billions of data points from tracking systems that the U.N. International Maritime Organization requires for about 70,000 fishing vessels.

The result was a picture of fishing that the study, led by David Kroodsma of Global Fishing Watch, says "has never been directly quantified." Because of data limitations, the percentage of the oceans fished could be as high as 73 percent, the study said.

"Fishing is happening almost everywhere and all the time," said Jackie Savitz, chief policy officer for Oceana, an advocacy group. "I think people don't really have a sense of how heavily fished our oceans are and how intensely they are fished."

She said the intensity of global fishing documented by Thursday's study is far greater than researchers have been able to track in the past.

"That means we're putting more pressure on fish populations," Savitz said, noting that increased fishing also means more inadvertent catching of other species, such as sea turtles. "That means there's more pressure on our oceans than we thought."

There was particularly intense fishing off the southeastern coast of South America, the eastern coast of China, western Africa, and all around Europe and the Mediterranean, the research found. The North Atlantic, far northeastern Pacific, Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean were far more devoid of fishing.

"What we need to do is, both within countries and internationally, put in place sustainable fisher-management policies," Savitz said. "Unless we get policies in place to protect fishery sustainability, what we're essentially doing is undermining our food security."

The study found that ships from just five places accounted for more than 85 percent of global fishing - Spain, Taiwan, Japan, North Korea and China. China's fishing footprint was by far the largest, however, based on data for 2016. (The study used data from 2012 through 2016.)

Daniel Pauly, an expert on global fisheries and a professor at the University of British Columbia, added that Thursday's study "adds a new dimension to the scientists' and fisheries manager's tool kit, a very effective one."

"It can be seen as one of the first instances of high-tech being turned against illegal fishing (until now, it was the pirates who used it)," he wrote in an email from Hong Kong. "What is new is that [Global Fishing Watch] enables civil society to use satellites to monitor the activity of fishing vessels, and thus to fight against illegal fishing and to increase transparency."

In addition, Pauly said, the data helps make a case that all fishing vessels - not only the large commercial ones operating far offshore - should be monitored by satellites. "The next thing is thus to pressure the International Maritime Organization to close the loophole they have for smaller, coastal fishing vessels, which do not need to have" electronic tracking systems.

The technology used by Global Fishing Watch to conduct the study relies on public broadcast data from the global Automatic Identification System, which uses satellite and land-based receivers to track the movement of ships over time. Not all fishing crews willingly broadcast their locations - particularly those intent on breaking the law - and crews can switch off their trackers, potentially hindering the usefulness of the technology.

But the United States and other countries already require vessels of a certain size to use the locator system, partly as a safety measure to avoid collisions at sea. Global Fishing Watch allows users to access that information to track specific vessels over time.

Thursday's study also shed light on the immense scale of global fishing, noting that in 2016 alone, tracked ships spent 40 million hours at sea and traveled nearly 180 million miles - "equivalent to traveling to the Moon and back 600 times."

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