

**The Human Cost of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated
(IUU) Fishing on the High Seas: Threats to Global Security
and Human Ethics**

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Introduction: Inhumanity at Sea

Perpetuated by the insatiable global appetite for cheap protein, illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing has become a dangerous norm in today's food supply chain. In international waters far beyond the shores of formal governance, the momentum of a vicious status quo seems impossible to challenge. Stripping the oceans of fish stocks with impunity, IUU operations have also been closely tied to human trafficking, the trade of human beings for forced labor, often by means of fraud, coercion, and violence. High seas fishing vessels remain at sea for long periods of time, keeping workers captive through distance, danger, and debt. Tens of millions of people working aboard thousands of illegal fishing vessels on the high seas have no recourse to adjudicate labor abuse claims, like wage theft and inhumane working conditions. Despite all 21st century technology, at least one ship sinks every three days on the global ocean.¹ U.S. consumption of IUU fish products undermines our own security paradigm, which perceives the corruption of democratic values as a threat to national security. Throughout its history, the U.S. has gone to war time after time to preserve institutional and cultural notions of justice in the world order. However, the U.S. subverts its own credibility to promote its vision of morality if our routine practices enslave seafarers abroad.

Global Food Insecurity: Dependence on Illicit Supply Chains

According to the World Health Organization, seafood accounts for about 17% of total global protein intake.² Human population growth exerts tremendous pressure on the fishing industry to feed a burgeoning coastal middle class. Simultaneously, human population growth degrades the global ocean through warming, acidification, and pollution, at such a rapid pace that there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050.

The U.S. Intelligence Community has directly acknowledged the national security implications of IUU fishing and warns that IUU accounts for 15-30% of global annual catch. IUU fishing can account for

¹ Urbina, Ian. Yale Environment 360. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/lawless-ocean-the-link-between-human-rights-abuses-and-overfishing>.

² World Health Organization. "Availability and consumption of fish." https://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/3_foodconsumption/en/index5.html

more than half the revenue generated by tuna fisheries, and over 80% of the revenue from anchovy fishing,³ demonstrating a clear reliance on illicit supply chains. As illicit seafood trade generates an estimated \$160 billion in annual sales,⁴ it is no secret waiting to be exposed, but rather an economy of its own.

The inhumanity poisoning our plates is permitted by global indifference. Fleets from Spain, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and others are at the heart of the IUU seafood economy, but the world's customers are morally complicit too. 90% of the products we consume pass through maritime shipping lanes,⁵ making the seafaring labor force an integral foundation of the global economic system.

Poor standards for identifying and publishing the origin of fish products is evidence of our complacency. Shrimp peeled by slaves has been traced through supply chains to major U.S. retailers like Wal-Mart, Whole Foods, Petco, Red Lobster, and Olive Garden.⁶ In fish laundering and transshipment, some licensed vessels fish beyond their quotas or authorized areas, then transfer the illegal portion of their catch to other vessels at sea, a practice comprising 12% (or about \$600 million) of the Pacific tuna industry. Endemic seafood fraud precludes even the most sustainable citizens from being ethical consumers. Using DNA analysis, researchers confirmed that roughly 50% of fish sold in 134 restaurants, grocery stores, and seafood markets in Massachusetts were not the same species that the menu or label claimed.⁷ The global food market has acclimated to *expect* the cheapest ingredients and prices humanly possible, at an immeasurable cost. Those costs still exist even if they are not passed on to the American voter; the costs are passed on to seafarers in the form of grotesque human rights violations on the high seas.

Spotlight: Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia

The world's most dangerous and gruesome profession, long-haul fishing is a natural starting point for examining IUU and trafficking. According to the U.S. National Intelligence Council, 25% of workers

³ National Intelligence Council

⁴ Urbina

⁵ Urbina

⁶ AP

⁷ National Intelligence Council

on long-haul Thai-flagged ships were not working “willingly” in 2013.⁸ Blacklisted multiple times by the U.S. State Department, Thailand is one of the most extreme human trafficking hubs on the planet. Yet pervasive “sea slavery” has transformed Thailand into one of the world’s largest shrimp suppliers, of which the U.S. is a primary customer.⁹ Americans consume an astounding 1.3 billion pounds of shrimp each year, about four pounds per person.¹⁰

Innocent workers fall victim to a corrupt system, perpetuated by acquiescent leaders. As the Thai economy has grown over the past few decades, domestic wages rose with GDP as unemployment plummeted. Many Thai citizens can afford to avoid working low-paying fishing jobs, with all their unquantifiable health atrocities and the constant threat of injury. These economic factors have pressured Thai-flagged vessels in the South China Sea to exploit cheap foreign labor rather than domestic workers, creating a powerful market demand for trafficking and migrant abuse.¹¹ A human trafficker will bait men from neighboring states like Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar by offering them fictitious construction jobs. When the worker arrives in port, the debt the worker accrued during passage is used to sell him to a fishing captain. On one Thai vessel, 40 trafficked Cambodian boys worked 20-hour days, barefoot, in all weather, on the slippery deck of a ship infested with roaches and rats.¹² In Myanmar, eyewitnesses report executions of fellow workers as a means of enforcing compliance. According to the United Nations, almost 60% of migrants trafficked from Cambodia into the Thai fishing industry reportedly witnessed the murder of a coworker by the ship’s captain.¹³ In a case of several murders of Burmese workers, the Thai government investigated murder cases based on *trafficking* charges, but neglected to pursue *murder* charges, despite overwhelming evidence accrued by the Environmental Justice Foundation. By obstructing prosecution, local corruption and the entrenchment of officers in trafficking networks is a clear barrier to global justice.¹⁴

⁸ United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence. “Global Implications of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing.” 2016.

⁹ Associated Press

¹⁰ National Intelligence Council

¹¹ Urbina, Ian. The Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/thailand-s-sea-slaves-shackled-whipped-and-beheaded-1.4045205>

¹² Urbina, Ian. “Lawless Ocean: The Link Between Human Rights Abuses and Overfishing.” November 2019. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/lawless-ocean-the-link-between-human-rights-abuses-and-overfishing>

¹³ United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence. “Global Implications of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing.” 2016.

¹⁴ Urbina, Ian. *The Outlaw Ocean*. <https://www.theoutlawocean.com/thailand-sea-slavery/>

IUU operations thrive on pervasive corruption to evade capture and bribe officials.¹⁵ Corruption is so entrenched that journalists have been beaten to death after exposing authorities who accepted bribes to overlook IUU transgressions.¹⁶ According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, many Chinese companies are known to ignore labor rights, human rights, environmental regulations, and best practices when operating abroad. By reducing the risk of corruption and leveraging relationships built through U.S. foreign aid, the U.S. should exert pressure on illicit Chinese fishing operations.¹⁷ Ultimately, an international consensus to ban high-seas fishing and establish marine protected areas in its place would increase fish stocks, foster long-term sector growth, and provide a more equitable share of fishery resources to developing nations.¹⁸

Implications of IUU for Global Security

IUU fishing has major consequences for global security. First, IUU threatens domestic food security by facilitating overfishing. In the US Exclusive Economic Zone, populations of large predatory fish have been reduced by 90% of their preindustrial levels. Specifically, failure to control unreported catches prevented the recovery of North Sea cod, which is a dietary staple in North America. Declining global catch due to overfishing increases the pressure to cut operational costs.¹⁹ Second, IUU results in bycatch, the incidental capture of non-target species, which disrupts food webs, threatens endangered species, and depletes oxygen levels, leading to hypoxia in critical ecosystems. Third, dangerous IUU practices like blast or dynamite fishing have destroyed half the coral reef system in Southeast Asia's coral triangle, where 130 million people derive their primary calories and income.²⁰ Fourth, IUU fishing exacerbates existing tensions within and between countries, including disputes over fishing rights, property, territory, fishery management, and particularly Chinese sovereignty in South Asia. Aggressive proliferation of Chinese fishing vessels in the Gulf of Guinea and elsewhere has undercut local economies and displaced legal workers.

¹⁵ National intelligence Council

¹⁶ National Intelligence Council

¹⁷ Runde, Daniel. CSIS. "Fighting Corruption for U.S. Economic and National Security Interests." <https://www.csis.org/analysis/fighting-corruption-us-economic-and-national-security-interests>

¹⁸ Pauly, Daniel. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/a-global-ban-on-fishing-on-the-high-seas-the-time-is-now>

¹⁹ National Intelligence Council

²⁰ National Intelligence Council

Finally, IUU fishing flourishes in the lack of governance regimes. A perfect example is Somalia, a failed state riddled with internal and external threats. ISIS and al-Shabab flourish under a weak, if existent, local government. Formal governance is virtually powerless in a population controlled by highly autonomous enclaves.²¹ Without governing institutions in the treacherous waters off the Horn of Africa, the only enforcement options are a private marine police force and bounty hunters, with a morally objectionable risk portfolio. Private security forces have grown into a \$20 billion global business.²² The same gaps in international law that enable IUU fishing abroad facilitate the terrorist and criminal networks that threaten national security in the homeland. Since U.S. policy already employs moral imperatives to justify behemoth defense spending for counterterrorism, we should leverage existing funding priorities to address IUU fishing and the crimes our own citizens passively commit at every meal.

Policy Responses and Ethical Justification

The absence of a simple, actionable solution does not exempt moral leadership. In the coming decade, compounding environmental degradation will only exacerbate existing injustices. Escalating resource conflicts for depleting fish stocks²³ will likely force fishing vessels further out to the high seas to follow migratory species as they adapt to climate change. As we scrape the high seas for the rest of their fish with more manpower and destructive technology than ever before, the probability and frequency of labor abuse will likely rise. Is farmed fish the solution? According to NOAA, aquaculture uses about half a metric ton of wild fish to produce one metric ton of farmed seafood.²⁴ About 90% of seafood volume consumed in the U.S. is imported, meaning that most of our marine protein was sourced outside U.S. governance regimes. Therefore, promoting regulated domestic seafood production may reduce global demand for cheap seafaring labor.

In an uncertain COVID-19 landscape of isolated hoarding, confronting IUU fishing may feel like an intimate threat to our sacred food supply and cultural culinary norms. We delay social awareness to mitigate risk to our nutritional normalcy. As temporary tenants of earth's galactically unique and precious

²¹ Urbina

²² Urbina

²³ Urbina

²⁴ National Intelligence Council

ecosystem, we have a duty to hold our supply chain and regulators accountable. Our species has the unique privilege of consuming and voting not with our taste for convenience but with our moral intelligence. In 2020, the stakes have grown and the margins of error are human lives. Decisive ethical courage is no longer a choice. Our economies, our people, and our humanity depend on it.