

China's Global Fishing Footprint

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To meet the ever-growing global demand for seafood, distant-water fishing vessels are traveling farther from their national waters and fishing longer. These vessels may fish in vast expanses of international waters known as the high seas, which can be managed by regional fishery management organizations for specific species like tuna, or can be unmanaged with little to no oversight. Distant-water fishing vessels can also fish in another country's waters known as exclusive economic zones (EEZs), but they need authorization from each country.

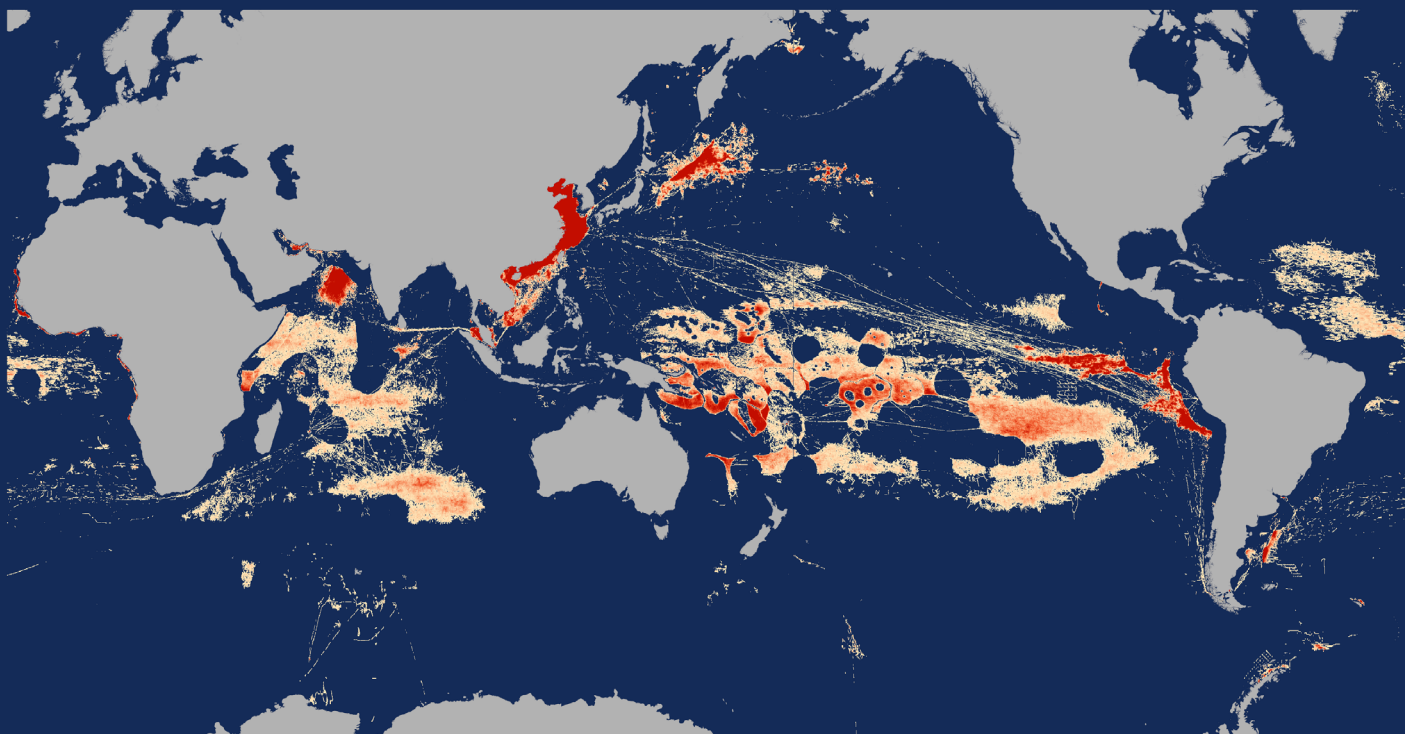
China is the largest fishing nation in the world. Using data from Global Fishing Watch* (GFW) — an independent nonprofit founded by Oceana in partnership with Google and SkyTruth — Oceana analyzed China's apparent fishing

activity** from Jan. 1, 2022, to Dec. 31, 2024. The activity was tracked using automatic identification system (AIS) data transmitted by vessels. AIS is a tracking system that transmits a vessel's identity, speed, and location. Vessels that were not transmitting AIS are not included in the analysis. While AIS analysis shows a large share of China's distant-water fishing activity, it provides only a partial view of China's total fishing footprint.

Oceana's analysis found that over 57,000 fishing vessels flagged to China fished for more than 110 million hours during the nearly three-year period. These vessels were responsible for over 44% of the global fishing activity reflected in the Global Fishing Watch data during this period.

CHINA'S GLOBAL FISHING FOOTPRINT (2022 - 2024)

Apparent fishing hours per square 0.1°: 0.1 100+



Note: Data based solely on vessels flagged to China and broadcasting AIS.

Source: Oceana using GFW data
Marine Regions

WHERE CHINA'S FLEET FISHED (2022 - 2024)

China heavily fished its own waters, with its domestic fleet fishing over **81 MILLION HOURS.**



~30% of all fishing on the high seas was conducted by China.

China spent over **30 MILLION HOURS** fishing outside of its EEZ.

China spent more than **8.3 MILLION HOURS** fishing on the high seas.

China fished in the EEZs of over **90 OTHER NATIONS** for more than **22 MILLION HOURS.**

China's fishing vessels were most active in:



SOUTH KOREA



TAIWAN



JAPAN



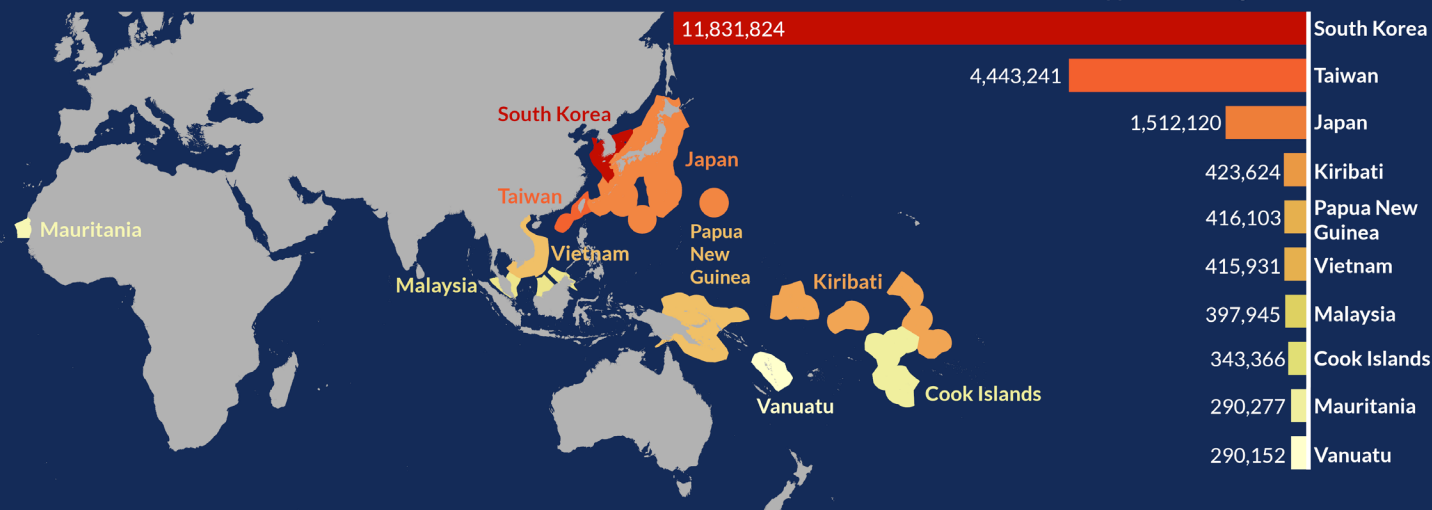
KIRIBATI



PAPUA NEW GUINEA

TOP 10 FOREIGN WATERS WHERE CHINA FISHED (2022 - 2024)

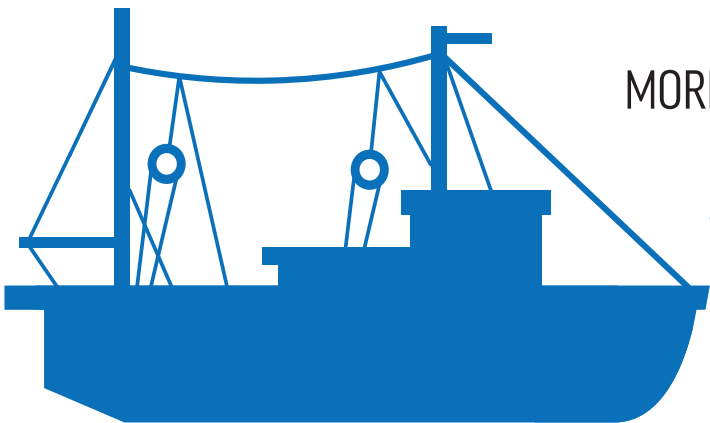
Number of Apparent Fishing Hours



Note: Data based solely on vessels flagged to China and broadcasting AIS.

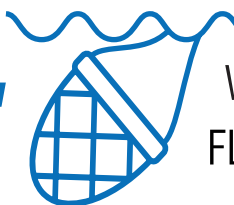
Source: Oceana using GFW data
Marine Regions

SPOTLIGHT ON CHINA'S FISHING FLEET (2022 - 2024)



MORE THAN **55,000 VESSELS FLAGGED TO CHINA**

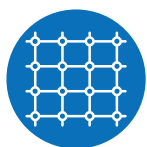
fished within their own EEZ.



WORLDWIDE, OVER **28,000 VESSELS** FLAGGED TO CHINA WERE **TRAWLERS**,

vessels that drag large heavy nets behind them and pull up everything in their path.

China's fleet uses a variety of fishing gear. In addition to trawling, the primary gear types used were longlines, gillnets, and dredges.



MORE THAN **32,000 OF CHINA'S DISTANT-WATER FISHING VESSELS**

were found on the high seas and in foreign EEZs.

HOW DOES CHINA OPERATE A FLEET THIS LARGE?

China's fishing on the high seas is only profitable because of government subsidies and low-cost labor.¹ China provides its distant-water fishing industry with an estimated **USD \$2.47 billion in harmful subsidies, which is more than the next five most subsidized distant-water fishing nations combined** (Japan, Korea, Russia, United States, Thailand).² Subsidies can include tax breaks and assistance with buying fuel, ship building, and repair, which enable China's fleet to fish anywhere in the world. A practice called transshipment also allows fishing vessels to remain at sea for long periods of time by enabling the transfer of catch to refrigerated cargo vessels that can rendezvous with, or "encounter," multiple fishing vessels before returning to port. These vessels also resupply fishing vessels with fresh crew, water, and fuel.

Vessels flagged to China were involved in nearly 40% of the total global encounter events, with over 13,000 encounters at sea. The vast majority of these encounters occurred on the high seas (97%). Many of the remaining encounters occurred in the waters of Kiribati, a remote island nation in the central Pacific.

According to GFW, nearly a third of the encounters involving Chinese vessels (31%) could not be fully matched to public authorizations by the relevant regional fishery management organization. While transshipping can be legal, it can also be a weak link in the seafood supply chain by enabling vessels

to remain in at sea in remote areas for long periods of time, beyond the reach of oversight and accountability in ports. A previous Oceana study³ found that the majority of fishing vessels engaged in long voyages in 2023 were Chinese-flagged, with approximately 1,500 vessels traveling an average of nearly 350 days without visiting a port.



Fishing vessels leaving a port in China.

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IN BRIEF...

China has the world's largest and most subsidized fishing fleet with tens of thousands of distant-water fishing vessels reaching all corners of our oceans. Large fishing fleets can have significant impacts on ocean health. With so much fishing occurring on the high seas and in the EEZs of other nations, transparency is essential to ensure this fishing occurs within the boundaries of the law. **Governments like the United States should require expanded transparency and traceability of imported seafood to help verify that it is safe, legally caught, responsibly sourced, and honestly labeled.**



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China-flagged trawler fishing at sea.

REFERENCES AND DISCLAIMERS

¹Sala et al. (2018) The economics of fishing the high seas. Available: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aat2504> Accessed Nov 3, 2021.

²Skerritt et al. (2023) Mapping the unjust global distribution of harmful fisheries subsidies. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2023.105611> Accessed May 8, 2025.

³Oceana. (2024) Never-Ending Voyages: Vessels Spending Years At Sea. Available: <https://usa.oceana.org/reports/never-ending-voyages-vessels-spending-years-at-sea/>

*Global Fishing Watch, a provider of open data for use in this fact sheet, is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing ocean governance through increased transparency of human

activity at sea. The views and opinions expressed in this fact sheet are those of the authors, which are not connected with or sponsored, endorsed or granted official status by Global Fishing Watch. By creating and publicly sharing map visualizations, data and analysis tools, Global Fishing Watch aims to enable scientific research and transform the way our ocean is managed. Global Fishing Watch's public data was used in the production of this publication.

**Any and all references to "fishing" should be understood in the context of Global Fishing Watch's fishing detection algorithm, which is a best effort to determine "apparent fishing effort" based on vessel speed and direction data from the automatic identification system (AIS) collected via satellites and terrestrial receivers. As AIS data varies in

completeness, accuracy, and quality, and the fishing detection algorithm is a statistical estimate of apparent fishing activity, therefore it is possible that some fishing effort is not identified and, conversely, that some fishing effort identified is not fishing. For these reasons, Global Fishing Watch qualifies all designations of vessel fishing effort, including synonyms of the term "fishing effort," such as "fishing" or "fishing activity," as "apparent" rather than certain. Any/all Global Fishing Watch information about "apparent fishing effort" should be considered an estimate and must be relied upon solely at your own risk. Global Fishing Watch is taking steps to make sure fishing effort designations are as accurate as possible. All references to EEZ boundaries and sovereignty are based solely off the Marine Regions "World EEZ v12" definitions.

To learn more, visit
usa.oceana.org/StopIllegalFishing