



Pirates and Plunder: Fisheries subsidies support illegal or rogue fishing

The global depletion of ocean fisheries has major environmental, economic, and social impacts around the globe. Yet, despite international consensus that the world's oceans are in trouble, a handful of countries continue to provide massive subsidies to their commercial fishing industries. These subsidies are a primary driver of global overfishing and other destructive fishing practices, including illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, also referred to as "pirate fishing."

Pirate fishing is a serious global problem and one of the main impediments to the achievement of sustainable world fisheries. Worth between \$4 billion and \$9 billion per year, pirate fishing represents a major loss of revenue, particularly to some of the poorest countries in the world where dependency on fisheries for food, livelihoods and revenues is high.¹

Pirate fishing respects neither national boundaries nor international attempts to manage high seas resources. Pirate fishing puts unsustainable pressure on fish stocks, marine wildlife and habitats, subverts labor standards and distorts markets. Pirate fishing is comprised of three principal types of activities:

- **Illegal** fishing where vessels operate in violation of the laws of a fishery.
- **Unreported** fishing that has not been reported or has been misreported to the relevant national authority or regional organization, in contravention of applicable laws and regulations.
- **Unregulated** fishing by vessels without nationality, or vessels flying the flag of a country not party to the regional organization governing that fishing area or species.

Fisheries Subsidies and Pirate Fishing

Fisheries subsidies can and often do support "pirate" fishing. Despite the general lack of transparency and accountability by governments about fisheries subsidies, there is clear evidence of fraud and misuse related to these funds. Some examples include:

- In 2005 and 2006, Oceana documented numerous boats in the Mediterranean using illegal driftnets. Many of these boats were the recipients of subsidies from Italy and the European Union (EU) to convert to legal nets – a program that has given out more than \$200 million Euro (\$240 million) – yet were still using the illegal gear.²
- The Spanish government has given at least \$1.7 million Euro (\$2 million) in subsidies to a businessman with well-known connections to "pirate fishing." This businessman is currently facing legal action for illegal fishing by at least four countries, and was recently convicted by the United States.

¹ www.illegal-fishing.info/. Chatham House.

² OCEANA (2006) Italian Driftnetters 2006: The Oceana Report.

- Most European bluefin tuna purse seine fishing fleets operating in the Mediterranean have been either modernized or completely rebuilt in the past ten years using grants from European Union public funds. As a result, bluefin tuna catches are more than 40 percent higher than the quota set by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), and actual catch amounts of bluefin tuna are deliberately underreported to allow for continued fishing.
- Fishing subsidies have been associated with pirate fishing for Patagonian toothfish, commonly referred to as Chilean Sea Bass, in the Southern Oceans. For example, the 28 vessels involved in the European Union-Argentina Fisheries Agreement received a total of 72.7 million Euros to exploit fisheries in the South Atlantic. A further 24 million Euros were allocated to provide opportunities for additional vessels to fish in Argentinean waters.³ Two vessels funded by the European Union were caught conducting illegal fishing activity related to Patagonian toothfish.
- An increasing amount of cod from the Barents Sea is being delivered directly to European harbors by Russian vessels, some of which received Russian government subsidies for fuel or vessel modernization. Subsidies by the Russian government to its fishing fleet amount to \$1 billion annually. The illegal fishing of Barents Sea cod is among the best documented in the world, both regarding volumes and actors. According to estimates presented by the Norwegian Coast Guard and International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) respectively, between 100 and 166,000 tons of cod is fished illegally in the Barents Sea annually, representing up to 40 percent of the Russian catch.
- Fish populations off of the west coast of Africa have declined 50 percent since 1945 causing conflict between traditional fishermen and the foreign vessels from countries with access agreements from Senegal. The access agreements specify that only artisanal fishermen can fish within 6 miles of the shore but this rule is routinely broken. In addition to this illegal fishing, there is also a great deal of underreporting of actual catch. The European fleet declares catches of approximately 13,000 tons a year in this area but recent reports show that catches are closer to 88,000 to 110,000 tons a year, up to eight times the declared total.⁴

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³ WWF, 2000. Analysis of the fishing agreement between the EU and Argentina.

⁴ Clover, Charles. *The End of the Line, How Overfishing is Changing the World and What We Eat*. The New Press, 2006.