

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing

“IUU fishing vessels have been known to subsidize costs using forced labor exploitation, as they are already evading laws, regulations and oversight to drive profits and may be more willing to exploit workers.” – Oceana, [Illegal Fishing and Human Rights at Sea](#)

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What is illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing?

[Illegal, unreported, and unregulated \(IUU\)](#) fishing includes all fishing that occurs outside of fisheries laws and regulations, or that outright breaks those laws and regulations. IUU fishing includes the following:

- **Illegal:** Fishing without a license, fishing over a set quota, fishing in a prohibited region, fishing with prohibited gear, or fishing prohibited species.
- **Unreported:** Not reporting or underreporting fish caught.
- **Unregulated:** Fishing in regions with patchy regulation or little enforcement, prevalent on the high seas. Unmanaged fish stocks, such as non-commercial species or reduction fisheries, also lack governance to assess global catch estimates and may result in challenging international access negotiations.

Estimates of global IUU fishing reach up to 26 million tons of fish caught annually, with a value between 10 and 23 billion U.S. dollars. Its scope is not relegated to the high seas, but can also occur within a country's exclusive fishing zones.

Advocacy organizations have been working, and continue to work, toward a [definition of IUU fishing](#) that is inclusive of [fishing associated with forced labor and human trafficking](#). Two major efforts occurred in 2016:

- [Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment:](#)

Requested the UN and its related agencies to coordinate in order to examine and address the linkages between IUU fishing, forced labor, and human rights abuses.

- [Letter to the U.S. President regarding the Seafood Import Monitoring Program](#) (SIMP): Asked that SIMP include seafood produced using forced labor or where there is identified risk of human rights abuses, instead of merely IUU fishing as defined above.

References:

- Pew Charitable Trusts: [FAQ: Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing](#)
- FAO: [Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated \(IUU\) fishing](#)
- A joint effort by multiple organizations: [Tragedy in the Marine Commons: The Intertwined Exploitation of Ocean Ecosystems and Fisheries Workers](#)
- A joint let authored and signed by multiple organizations: [2016 Letter to President Obama regarding proposed Seafood Import Monitoring Program](#)
- Oceana: [Transparency and Traceability: Tools to Stop Illegal Fishing](#)

IUU fishing and human rights abuses

Overfishing and IUU fishing have resulted in diminishing fish stocks and led to a decrease in the return on investment for fishing companies and vessel captains. Depleted resources in nearshore waters force vessels to go further out to sea and for longer periods of time to fill their catch quota, increasing fuel and maintenance costs. These circumstances, combined with a high global demand for seafood, increase incentives for [overfishing, labor abuses](#), and other illegal activities. In order to maintain profits, fishing companies may seek to reduce the operating costs within their control such as reducing crew sizes, relying on inexpensive migrant labor, increasing work hours, and ignoring important health and safety measures.

Due to the remoteness of much fishing activity and the challenges of enforcing laws at sea, there is a reputation of “[lawlessness](#)” that is ripe for exploitation, and illegal activities often occur with impunity. [Illegal activities that may be conducted at sea](#) include IUU fishing, human trafficking and forced labor, piracy. Organized crime, including trafficking in wildlife, drugs, weapons, or other goods, may also take place. Of these activities, [recent research](#) shows that labor abuses account for the most common crimes connected with IUU fishing. Undocumented or unmonitored steps in supply chains pose particular areas of high risk due to their lack of transparency. For example, an [EJF 2020 briefing](#) documents distant water fishing vessels violating principles of the [ILO Work in Fishing Convention \(C188\)](#) and engaging in illegal fishing activities, such as shark finning, spearfishing seal, and hunting dolphins as bait.

Undocumented or unmonitored steps in supply chains pose particular areas of high risk due to their lack of transparency. Another challenge facing governments and the seafood industry today is the difficulty of quantifying the true extent of illegal activity and human or labor rights violations because these practices are intentionally hidden. Unauthorized transshipment and the lack of adequate fisheries monitoring, control, and surveillance systems, as well as the lack of transparency of vessel owners and

histories have further facilitated an environment where human rights and environmental violations may occur with impunity.

References:

- Environmental Justice Foundation: [Cetacean slaughter, shark finning, and human rights abuse in Taiwan's fishing fleet.](#)
- FishWise: [The Links between IUU fishing, human rights, and traceability.](#)
- Ian Urbina: [Lawless Ocean: The link Between Human Rights Abuses and Overfishing.](#)
- Marine Insight: [9 Types of Maritime Crimes.](#)
- Oceana: [Illegal Fishing and Human Rights Abuses at Sea: Using Technology to Highlight Suspicious Behaviors.](#)
- Mackay M, Hardesty BD, and Wilcox C (2020): [The Intersection Between Illegal Fishing, Crimes at Sea, and Social Well-Being.](#) *Front. Mar. Sci.* 7:589000. doi: 10.3389/fmars.2020.589000.

Countering IUU fishing in seafood supply chains

A comprehensive sustainable seafood program requires a deep assessment of both environmental and social components of a company's supply chains. Given the links between IUU fishing and human rights abuses, best practice is for companies to take the following steps in their supply chains:

- [Assess](#) risk by collecting and analyzing key information about products, companies, and people associated with the production of seafood.
- Develop [traceability](#) systems to increase visibility and supply chain oversight regarding vessel information and activity.

These actions help protect against reputational risk, verify compliance with environmental and human rights regulations, satisfy transparency and sustainability-focused consumers, and prevent potential supply chain disruptions and revenue loss.

Countering IUU fishing is a massive undertaking that cannot be done by seafood businesses alone. Fortunately, the increasing use of [import regulations](#) and [collaborative, industry-led traceability initiatives](#) to combat this problem is promising. Simultaneously, port state measures, investments in producer country infrastructure, and private sector partnership can begin to tackle the daunting challenge of solving IUU fishing.

For more guidance on tackling IUU fishing, see Oceana's [Transparency and Traceability: Tools to Stop Illegal Fishing](#). For more information on port state measures, see Pew Charitable Trusts' [Port State Measures Agreement: Why Seafood Buyers Should Help](#).