At a glance
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Illegal fishing in south-east Asia

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a scourge of south-east Asia's vital fisheries sector, costing billions of euros, harming biodiversity and facilitating transnational crime. The countries of the region are starting to work together on improving the situation.

Background

Fisheries pay a vital role in south-east Asian economies

The ten ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries are estimated to account for one fifth of global marine fish production. Six of them are in the world's top 15 fish producers, with Indonesia in second place. The sector supports over 100 million jobs (out of a total population of 600 million) including 10 million fishermen. In 2015, ASEAN fish exports were worth US$11 billion.

What is illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing?

Fisheries are regulated by national law (within each country's exclusive economic zone) and (in international waters) the rules of intergovernmental regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs). **Illegal fishing** includes fishing without a licence, exceeding quotas, using forbidden equipment or destructive practices, fishing out of season, fishing in prohibited areas, and fishing in foreign waters without an access agreement ('poaching'). **Unreported fishing** refers to catches which are not reported, or misreported, to national and RFMO authorities. In international waters, RFMO rules only apply to countries which are members of that organisation; vessels from other countries are therefore **unregulated**, even when their operations violate an RFMO's conservation and management measures.

Techniques used by IUU fishing vessels to escape control

IUU operators often register their vessels in countries (for example, Cambodia) with which they have no genuine connection, but which exercise minimal supervision. While not illegal as such, these 'flags of convenience' offer various advantages: owners avoid the regulations enforced in their own countries; vessels can easily avoid detection and prosecution for IUU fishing by switching flag and name ('flag hopping'); if the flag state is not party to an RFMO, they can often fish unhindered in the waters managed by that RFMO. To avoid having to waste fuel by returning to port, many vessels offload cargo to other ships at sea. Although often a legitimate practice, such at-sea transhipments are not subject to the same controls as when a ship is in port, making it easy to launder illegally caught fish by blending them in with other catches. Operators also use 'ports of convenience', known for lax inspections, in order to land their catches.

Impacts of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing

For obvious reasons, IUU fishing is hard to quantify and estimates vary widely. According to one 2009 study, the western central Pacific and eastern Indian Oceans, including south-east Asia, are among the worst affected regions in the world, with IUU catches representing over one third of reported catches (compared to just 9 % in the north-west Atlantic) and little sign of improvement over the past 20 years.

Economic impact. As the south-east Asian country with by far the largest maritime territory, Indonesia is particularly vulnerable to fishing by unauthorised foreign vessels – in 2014, an estimated 5 000 of them, many from Vietnam, Thailand and China. In the same year, President Joko Widodo put the value of Indonesia's stolen catch at an astonishing US$20 billion a year – much higher than an earlier, perhaps more realistic figure of US$3 billion, rising to US$5 billion if lost tax revenue and ecosystem damage are included.

Environmental impact. IUU fishing adds to the pressure on already depleted fishing stocks. Worse, artisanal fishermen often use destructive fishing practices, such as dynamite and cyanide fishing (setting off homemade bombs or releasing cyanide underwater to flush out fish). Such practices have helped to destroy 70 % of Indonesia's reefs; they are also extremely wasteful – in dynamite fishing, most fish sink to the bottom and cannot be recovered. Endangered species targeted by IUU fishing include the Napoleon fish.

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Social impact. By helping to deplete fisheries stocks, IUU fishing is contributing to poverty in coastal communities, forcing fishermen who can no longer make an honest living to adopt IUU practices themselves or to turn to other forms of crime such as piracy. IUU fishing is also associated with child labour (for example in Cambodia), abusive employment conditions with sailors working for up to 22 hours per day, and even (in Thailand) de facto slavery: in 2013 an estimated 17 % of crewmembers on Thai boats were being held against their will. Many are members of the Rohingya minority, who flee persecution in Myanmar/Burma only to fall into the hands of human traffickers, but there are also Cambodians and Laotians.

Fighting illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in south-east Asia

IUU fishing is very hard to stamp out

Most south-east Asian countries lack enforcement capacity. For example, Indonesia has just 72 coastguard vessels to patrol nearly 6 million km^2 of territorial waters, over twice the size of the Mediterranean Sea. On top of this comes widespread corruption. Cross-border illegal fishing is facilitated by a lack of clearly defined maritime borders; for example, Indonesia has overlapping claims with Malaysia, Vietnam and several other neighbours. So long as the rewards outweigh the risks, IUU fishing is likely to continue.

What south-east Asian countries are doing to fight IUU fishing

Since 2014, Indonesian coastguards have captured and destroyed 220 foreign vessels found fishing illegally. Most were from Vietnam, and some of the ships were blown up live on webcam. Popular Fisheries Minister, Susi Pudjiastuti, claims that this zero tolerance policy has reduced the number of such ships in Indonesian waters by 90 %, thus enabling an equally dramatic recovery in fish stocks. Nevertheless, incursions continue – in the first half of October 2016, Indonesian authorities seized 32 foreign boats. In the Philippines, measures include banning imports of ammonium nitrate used by dynamite fishermen to manufacture bombs, carrying out spot checks on fish for tell-tale signs of explosions, and promoting alternative sources of income such as ecotourism. Some progress has been made in curbing dynamite fishing, now less common than in the 1980s and 1990s, but still widespread, with an estimated 10 000 incidents daily.

Regional measures at the level of ASEAN

Given the transnational nature of the problem, effective solutions require international cooperation. South-east Asia is covered by a patchwork of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, but despite discussions at ASEAN level, there is no binding common fisheries policy for the region. However, ASEAN is cooperating with the Japan-sponsored intergovernmental fisheries body SEAFDEC on a series of measures, to be applied by all its member states. SEAFDEC has already set up a Regional Fishing Vessel Register with details of all south-east Asian fishing vessels longer than 24 metres, and in future may extend it to smaller boats; it is also developing a web-based Catch Documentation System (partly modelled on a Swedish scheme), to be piloted in Brunei, then rolled out (on a voluntary basis) to other ASEAN countries in May 2017. In order to prevent IUU catches being landed in south-east Asian ports, SEAFDEC is also encouraging ASEAN countries to bar vessels with a track record of IUU fishing, share information on such vessels with one another, and systematically inspect catches in port. Once fully implemented, these measures should significantly help to manage fishing capacity, improve traceability, and prevent illegal catches from entering the supply chain.

How the European Union is helping

In 2015, EU imports of ASEAN fisheries products were worth €2.1 billion, one quarter of ASEAN's total extra-ASEAN fisheries exports. As one of ASEAN's biggest export markets, the EU has considerable leverage. In 2008 it adopted Regulation (EC) No 1005/2008, praised by environmental NGOs as 'a powerful tool to combat IUU fishing'. This establishes an alert system, under which countries which fail to adequately combat IUU fishing are given a warning ('yellow card'); failure to respond leads to a 'red card', banning their products from EU markets. Since March 2014, Cambodia has been under a red card; the Philippines was issued a yellow card in June 2014, but was cleared 10 months later after aligning its fisheries regulations with international law.

Due to rampant illegal fishing, Thailand also received a yellow card in April 2015. Since then it has installed an automatic tracking system on larger vessels, improved fisheries legislation, and cracked down on human trafficking. Although the European Parliament has no formal role in the process, it is closely monitoring the situation; after a November 2016 visit to Thailand, members of its Fisheries Committee welcomed these reforms as a step in the right direction. However, implementation is still weak, and the yellow card is likely to stay in force for the time being; a decision by the European Commission is expected in early 2017.