

Illegal Fishing in Bay of Bengal Must Stop

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From the age of sail till the modern era, humankind has consistently explored the sea to ensure their better livelihood. In the contemporary context, as land resources are depleting at an unprecedented rate, Ocean-borne activities have flourished immensely. The United Nations has taken this into cognizance and highlighted these issues in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Goal no 14 (Conserve and sustainably use the Oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development).

Undoubtedly, fishing is central to the livelihood and food security of approximately 200 million people worldwide, with a large concentration, especially in the developing world, relying on fish as a primary source of protein.

For centuries, humanity has seen the sea as an infinite source of food, a boundless sink for pollutants, and a tireless sustainer of coastal habitats. Scientists have mounting evidence of rapidly accelerating declines in once-abundant populations of cod, haddock, flounder, and scores of other fish species, as well as mollusks, crustaceans, birds, and plants. More and more, the harm to marine biodiversity can be traced not to natural events but to inadequate policies and illegal actions.

Not only Tuna but other species in the Indian Ocean, for instance, Emperors and Indian Mackerels, are categorized from fully exploited to over-exploited, as identified by FAO in 2008. Biomass of the global Ocean's valuable and predatory fish like the tuna, the grouper,

and the shark has reduced to 90 percent of the pre-industrial levels. In Asia, the biomass of coastal fisheries has declined by the same proportion, 8-12% of pre-fishing status. The catch per hour of the same surveillance ship, with the same gear in the Gulf of Thailand, reduced from 250 kg per hour to about 18 kg per hour from 1961 to 1999. Moreover, the supporting ecosystems for these fish stocks are further deteriorating; for instance, 88% of the coral reefs in Southeast Asia are reckoned to be threatened by human impact, mainly IUU fishing (World Bank 2004).

The Bay of Bengal and the IOR are vast seas; within this aquatic boundary, an insidious foe lurks hidden underwater. This threat is global and threatens sustainable fisheries and marine ecosystems, hence the stability within the regions. This threat is Illegal fishing. Unfortunately, this kind of fishing has become a worldwide problem, affecting the compassionate marine environment and food sources. Different international organizations, such as the United Nations, have emphasized its severe impacts and classified it as critical in sustainable development goals and maritime security. As a result, regional integration organizations such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) have become sources of hope. These organizations mobilize the member states to fight IUU fishing through Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS) systems. Such efforts seek to upgrade legal frameworks, encourage the exchange of information, and consolidate cooperation among countries that use waters in the Bay of Bengal.

Additionally, small-scale fisheries, a cornerstone of BIMSTEC member states' coastal economies, often operate decentralized, making them particularly susceptible to IUU fishing activities. These fisheries, characterized by their small-scale vessels, labor-intensive methods, and close ties to local communities, contribute significantly to food security and livelihoods. However, their informal nature and weak governance and monitoring create opportunities for IUU practices to thrive. BIMSTEC has recognized the critical role of these fisheries and the challenges they face and has initiated efforts to address IUU fishing through regional cooperation. While steps have been taken to enhance data sharing, capacity building, and joint patrols, the region still faces significant hurdles in effectively combating IUU fishing, particularly in small-scale fisheries.

Disaggregate data on the catch in the seas is central to the precise estimation of IUU fishing. Thus, while knowledge of the catch in thousands of tonnes per year at the national level can be helpful, it is only the first level of analysis; it is essential to start with the breakdown by the segment of the fleets (for example, the industrial tuna purse seine or the artisanal inshore demersal). Similarly, such disaggregation enables the identification of IUU fishing at the level of various fishing activities because the control measures and reporting practices can significantly differ between the fleets. Therefore, it is possible to improve the estimates of IUU and manage it effectively with the help of data and local experts.

However, IUU fishing in the Indian Ocean Region requires multi-faceted approaches and cooperation. The regional organizations use the FAO to formulate the NPOAs and the PSMA to implement measures. These efforts improve MCS systems, introduce traceability frameworks like eACDS, and strengthen cooperation through BoBLME and other related

initiatives. They focus on enhancing the management of fish stocks, pursuing the reduction of IUU fishing, backing changes, enhancing the legislative base, and enhancing member countries' capacities.

Nonetheless, the precise interrelationship between marine biodiversity and fisheries exploitation will considerably depend on the goals of fishery states and fishery "producers" in the Indian Ocean. Incidents indicate that the future course in the fight against IUU fishing requires a complex strategy. As we navigate the complexities of IUU fishing, collaboration emerges as our greatest ally. By forging partnerships across borders, harnessing technological innovations, and empowering local communities, we can safeguard the Oceans' bounty for future generations. Together, we embark on a journey toward a future where the seas thrive, and IUU fishing becomes a tale of the past.

As already mentioned, day by day, our land area diminishes while the demand for Ocean-sourced food and nutrition soars. With the increasing scarcity, can the world meet its needs from the sea amidst unplanned and reckless exploration? The responsibility for this crisis is collective. Governments, industries, and consumers all play a part in perpetuating or solving the problem. The Ocean is an interconnected body of water; over-exploitation in one region inevitably impacts the globe, threatening biodiversity and disrupting marine ecosystems worldwide. Are we ready to face the severity of this crisis, or will we continue to move forward with a glimmer of hope for better management? The time for decisive, unified action is now. We must implement stringent regulations, enforce sustainable practices, and take immediate responsibility to protect our Oceans before it's too late.

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