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Uncharted waters

China catches more fish than any other country. But its boats' forays into foreign waters are proving a headache for other fishing nations – and the EU

Over the last 18 months Chinese distant water fishing vessels have been involved in a series of worrying incidents. Among the most dramatic was the sinking in March 2016 of a Chinese trawler by Argentinian coastguards, following a dramatic chase in which the rogue fishing vessel attempted, unsuccessfully, to reach international waters.

The coastguard first fired across the bow, then into the hull of the Chinese vessel, after being obliged to manoeuvre to avoid attempts by the Chinese crew to force a collision. The coastguard rescued four of the 32-man crew, including the captain; the rest were picked up by another Chinese vessel that had been shadowing the drama.

Last August meanwhile, Ecuador's government apprehended a Chinese reefer in the sensitive protected waters around the Galapagos islands. In its hold, the authorities found almost 300 tons of fish, including more than 6,600 sharks, among them the endangered and protected hammerheads.

China's secretive operations

Illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (commonly shortened to 'IUU') is expanding at a time of growing ocean crisis. Global marine life is facing unprecedented threats, including from the impacts of marine pollution and climate change. For Ecuador and the other fishing nations that have succeeding in arresting rogue Chinese vessels, such episodes represent rare victories in the long war against practices that are threatening global fish stocks.

They are also a reminder that China now boasts the largest distant water fishing fleet in the world. Unfortunately for EU efforts to combat IUU fishing, the Chinese fleet, its ownership and operations are also among the most opaque and secretive.

The scale of Chinese IUU fishing is uncertain. China routinely over-reports its domestic catch because local officials inflate the statistics to meet centrally set quotas. But catches in more distant waters are routinely under-reported. Environmental groups accuse China of failing to cooperate in international monitoring and enforcement efforts, and of being reluctant to sanction the owners of vessels caught fishing in the territorial waters of other states or harvesting protected species on the high seas.

China accounts for 45 per cent of the approximately 500 foreign fishing vessels operating in the South Atlantic. According to Argentine reports, repeated illegal incursions into Argentina's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) have prompted the South American country to raise the issue in the Argentina/China Subcommittee on Fisheries, an annual meeting now in its eight round, under the respective Ministries of Agriculture.

China has promised to make available the satellite positioning system of its international fishing fleet and Argentina has handed over a detailed map of its own EEZ. Ignorance of the boundaries will no longer be a plausible excuse. However, China has failed to disclose what sanctions, if any, it has applied to the companies involved in recent episodes.

Muddying the waters

IUU fishing is a widespread problem, and the European Union, the world's largest market for marine products, has been slow to move. Now, as the block tries to ensure that illegal fish can no longer enter the EU market, the emergence of China as a major fishing power presents new challenges.

The practice of transhipment – where goods are taken to an initial destination, before being shipped somewhere else alongside other goods – makes it difficult to identify the origin and legality of disparate elements of the resulting mixed catch. Transhipment allows criminal operatives to mix illegal and legal catches – effectively fish 'laundering' on the high seas – and the reefers themselves are not always inspected in the ports where they land their cargo. Since they do not themselves fish, they may not be required to produce evidence of fishing permits. Without rigorous inspection and documentation the catch cannot be traced.

The scale of China's distant water fishing is a relatively recent phenomenon, driven both by a growth in domestic demand due to rising living standards, and a concurrent collapse in China's coastal resources because of pollution and over-fishing.

Much of China's domestic appetite for fish is served by its own substantial aquaculture industry which, in turn, has driven a growing need for wild fish to feed the cultivated stocks. In 1985, as China's coastal fishing went into decline, the Chinese government ordered the creation of the distant water fleet. Today, that fleet – estimated at between 2,500 and 3,000 vessels – survives on generous government fuel subsidies and tax breaks, and fishes in the waters of 93 countries around the world, and Antarctica.

To export fish to the EU, the world's largest market, requires both a certificate of origin and a health certificate. The efficacy of the system depends on rigorous enforcement in China. Dozens of local agencies are tasked with controlling the catches as they land. Lax and inconsistent labelling further confuses the picture. What is more, China is one of the world's most important fish processing countries. It re-processed and re-exports imported catches, offering further opportunities for mixing and laundering hauls of fish.

No oversight for the overseers

Chinese authorities insist that they do not tolerate illegal fishing and following recent episodes, China's Ocean Fisheries Management authority has promised that fishing companies found to be engaged in, supporting, or assisting in any illegal fishing will be barred from overseas fleets. But the industry's activities continue to be shrouded in secrecy. Details of China's fishing agreements with other countries are not publicly available, and data on China's fleet lack key elements, including ownership details, essential to effective enforcement.

European efforts to bring China into international monitoring and conservation efforts have been slow to yield results. Although China has improved its cooperation with Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, there has been little progress in the adoption of international agreements, and China has tended to oppose any proposed changes to IUU rules. Nor has China signed or ratified the Port State Measures Agreement, which seeks to bar access to port to any vessel reported to have engaged in IUU fishing.

The Chinese fleet, of course, is not unique in its responsibility for IUU fishing, but the scale of Chinese operations, the inherent overcapacity of the Chinese fleet and the lack of transparency of its data raise particular concerns at a time when the EU is working to verify the origins of the fish its people consume. The cumulative impact on the ocean of IUU fishing and other ocean stresses have the making of a perfect storm.



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