

Adverse Consequences of IUU Fishing

IUU fishing has a number of deleterious effects worldwide. This report details how these adverse consequences play out in diverse ways in nine countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. We draw on press reports; interviews with local fishers, experts and government officials; and comments by participants in off-the-record workshops hosted virtually at American University, May 23-25, 2022.

The **direct adverse economic consequences** of IUU fishing are multiple, including tax revenue losses for governments, declining revenues for legal fishers, and loss of livelihood and even food security for artisanal fishers and fishing communities. Estimates of the cost of IUU fishing in South America suggest economic losses as high as US\$2.3 billion, income losses as high as \$600 million, and tax revenue losses of as much as \$500 million.¹ Together, these figures suggest that, after Asia and Africa, South America is the region that suffers the biggest losses globally due to IUU fishing.²

- In Jamaica, one of the nations that has already seen dramatic declines in local catch due to the confluence of IUU fishing with a number of other environmental stressors, interviews repeatedly pointed to the decline in conch populations. IUU fishing of queen conch has cost Jamaica an estimated \$284 million over the last two decades. In an effort to recover depleting stocks, Jamaica has set a quota on how much queen conch can be caught to make up for overfishing by IUU fishers.³ These quotas impose a direct economic cost on local Jamaican fishers.⁴
- Many of the malign actors present in the region are subsidized by their home governments, allowing them to fish offshore for extended periods, with larger scale and more efficient equipment that enable large catches that undermine the viability of fishing as a livelihood for local fishers. Evidence from Panama, for example, suggests that because these foreign vessels do not put into the ports of the fisheries they exploit, the regulations that are imposed on fishing in those jurisdictions disproportionately fall on local fishers. Rising industrial scale fishing has driven increased regulatory oversight of quotas and fishing practices, but this burden falls most heavily on local artisanal fishers.⁵
- Similarly, in Argentina, IUU fishing has a relevant impact on Argentina's fishing industry, which is the country's fifth largest export.⁶ It is difficult for Argentine fishers to compete with subsidized foreign fleets, whose ships may have operating costs only half as high as their Argentinian counterparts, given that they do not comply with health or navigation standards.⁷
- In Chile, local experts noted that middlemen fixed local prices and evaded taxes as they launder seafood into legal markets, making it more difficult for legal fishers to compete.⁸

There are also multiple **indirect economic costs** to IUU fishing. Secondary effects may include the loss of local fishing or fish-related industries, such as chandlery services or tourism.



- One workshop participant noted that in Uruguay, the decline in the domestic fishing fleet has contributed directly to the government's willingness to open up the port of Montevideo to foreign vessels.
- Workshop participants from the Caribbean and Ecuador, for example, separately warned that it will be impossible to attract tourists to swim or scuba dive with turtles, sharks, or reef fish, if they have been devastated by IUU fishing in tandem with other stressors, such as global warming and ocean acidification.

The **environmental consequences** are also devastating, including overharvesting, declining stocks, collapse of fisheries, movement of fishing activity to deeper and deeper waters, illegal practices that overkill protected populations and cause “incidental” losses to other sea life or devastate local ecosystems, and the harvesting of spawning or juvenile populations at times that harm precarious populations.

- In Guyana, failure to implement bycatch provisions such as turtle excluding devices may have led to the accidental death of protected species, such as sea turtles.⁹
- Experts from a variety of countries, including Suriname, Costa Rica, and Ecuador, noted how the practice of shark finning, often characterized as “incidental” catch, has led to a decline in the size of average sharks caught.
- One workshop participant noted that lower-skilled, low capital fishers in Chile have taken to harvesting seaweed for export, with all the attendant consequences in terms of unsustainable ecosystem destruction.
- In several countries, such as Guyana, authorities told of “ghost traps” made of non-degradable nets that remain at sea where they trap and kill fish for extended periods.¹⁰
- Costa Rica has seen extensive use of illegal fishing methods, such as dynamiting. Such methods in the Gulf of Nicoya, for example, have led to a reduction in snapper and corvina populations, leaving little for those who rely on fishing to feed themselves. The high capture volumes made possible by illegal methods allow illegal fishers to sell their loads at prices which undercut legal fishers.¹¹
- Another issue is underreporting, coupled with the lack of data about fishing and marine habitats in Costa Rica's EEZ, which make it difficult for lawmakers and regulators to plan rational stock management strategies.¹²
- Reports from Panama suggest fishing is taking place during spawning season, and that the capture of juveniles has shifted patterns of reproduction and regeneration.¹³
- IUU fishing in Ecuador is having a major effect on the sustainability of the Galapagos Islands, a fragile and biodiverse ecosystem that is already at risk due to high numbers of



tourists putting pressure on the geography of the island and polluting the area. IUU fishing is also leading to food insecurity in Ecuador as food chains are upset.¹⁴ These changes are exacerbated by overfishing, climate change, and pollution (including from a recent oil spill) which are leading to the depletion of resources.

- Ships which are stationed just outside Argentina's EEZ use powerful reflectors to attract squid from the 200 nautical mile limit, lowering stocks substantially. The overfishing of squid in the region has a direct impact on other species in the region and beyond, due to the species' importance in the food chain.¹⁵
- Discard of unwanted incidental catches is prohibited in Argentina by federal fishing law, yet the government finds it difficult to enforce this prohibition even within its own waters. The damage is multiplied due to the fact that foreign ships are not subject to enforcement. Trawler boats, after collecting large amounts of unwanted fish or locating more valuable new catch, dispose of dead or dying fish in the ocean, depleting stocks unnecessarily.¹⁶
- Uruguay has seen IUU fishing of protected species, of spawning and juvenile fish, and the use of prohibited practices, such as bottom trawling, that have enormous impacts on marine ecosystems.¹⁷

Finally, there are the consequences of IUU fishing in terms of **food insecurity, the involvement of fishers in ancillary crimes, as well as potential conflict over fisheries**. In the nine countries covered by this report, estimates suggest that between 8 and 15% of the annual catch is lost to IUU fishing, accounting for as much as 815,000 tons of seafood harvested irregularly or illegally each year.¹⁸ One result is food insecurity, which falls most heavily on fishing communities with few alternative livelihoods and nutritional sources. Particularly pernicious is the combined economic and environmental cycle of overfishing: as stocks decline, catch becomes more valuable; and as catch becomes more valuable, overfishing and illegal fishing become more likely.

- In Jamaica, overexploitation of fish stocks has meant that the country – where seafood has an important role in culinary traditions – is almost entirely dependent on imported fish for domestic consumption.¹⁹
- In Ecuador, artisanal fishers complain that they no longer have viable stocks to fish because they must venture out too far for catch, where they must compete with more efficient industrial fleets.
- Depleted seafood stocks in Jamaican waters have also pushed local fishers into deeper waters, where there is a risk of collision with IUU fishers from around Central American and Caribbean who are searching for diminishing sources of conch and lobster.

- There are numerous reports of fishers becoming involved in the drug trade. To give two examples, Costa Rica in 2017 sentenced fishers who had been apprehended by U.S. authorities for smuggling nearly two tons of cocaine,²⁰ while four Guyanese men were sentenced to two to four years in the U.S. for transporting more than 3.7 tons of cocaine into the waters of Trinidad and Tobago.²¹
- In Uruguay, a \$200 million project for construction of a Chinese port facility led to widespread demonstrations by citizens concerned with the planned destruction of a local park, as well as the threat it posed to the South Atlantic marine ecosystem. The uproar, accompanied by a series of demonstration, forced the incumbent government to reverse course and withdraw from the agreement.²²

These adverse effects often overlap and intersect in complex fashion. In the pages ahead, we present nine vignettes regarding IUU fishing in the countries covered by this report.

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Argentina: Plunder and Danger on Argentina's Sea Shelf

Every night from November to April, floodlights from hundreds of Chinese fishing boats illuminate the darkness some 200 miles off Argentina's Atlantic Coast, where the armada harvests tons and tons of squid.

"Many speak of a floating city, but because of the noise and the lights, I see it more as a set of vacuum cleaners within a giant machine," an Argentine fisheries expert, who asked to remain anonymous because of his work in the sector, told InSight Crime.

Under international law, countries control the waters within 200 nautical miles of their shores. Argentina's sea shelf – one of [the widest](#) in the world – runs to the edge of its ocean territory. This creates prodigious fishing grounds just where Argentina's maritime law ends.

"Beyond mile 200, there is no control, and they fish what they can day and night," said Daniel Coluccio, a lobsterman and director of Argentina's Maritime Fisheries Observatory. "At some point the resource is going to diminish."

Nautical Mile 201: Where the Law Ends

For Coluccio, the problems start at nautical mile 201 in the Atlantic between the southern latitudes of 42 and 58 degrees, or from Argentina's Chubut province to just below the country's southern tip.

The extensive sea shelf provides [fertile feeding grounds](#) for marine life, thanks to nutrient-rich currents that produce massive amounts of plankton. Patagonian toothfish, snook, hake, lobster, squid and other valuable species thrive there.

At a depth of 200 meters, the shelf also allows for fishing techniques, such as giant trawling nets, that would be impossible in deeper waters, Coluccio explained.

"Nobody would fish with a trawl net in five thousand, six thousand meters," Coluccio said. "But in two hundred, two hundred and fifty meters, yes."

Foreign fleets trawl the edge of the shelf, hauling up catch. They are "always around mile 201," he said. "Why? The fish spillover from the Argentine shelf and enter international waters."

Dark Fleets Lead to Dangerous Chases

The presence of foreign boats at the edge of Argentina's 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is not illegal. But they take advantage of being just beyond the arm of Argentina law, engaging in a range of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices.

Boats regularly switch off their [automatic identification systems \(AIS\)](#), which broadcast a ship's identity and position. With their transponders disabled, the vessels raid Argentina's waters.

The worst offender, experts say, is China's deep-sea fishing fleet. A [2021 report by Oceana](#), a non-governmental organization that tracks IUU fishing, used satellite data to show that around 433 Chinese-flagged vessels fished for some 679,067 hours along Argentina's EEZ border between January 2018 and April 2021. The vessels disappeared from tracking systems more than 4,000 times.

Other dodgy [practices](#) include manipulating GPS positions and identification numbers.

Catching scofflaw boats is difficult. Argentina's navy, Coluccio said, would need radar-enabled ships in a constant patrol along its EEZ.

"Argentina just can't watch over it," he said.

When the navy does catch Chinese vessels suspected of illegal fishing, encounters have turned dangerous. In 2016, a naval vessel was pursuing the Lu Yuan Yu 010 to international waters when the Chinese-flagged trawler [reversed](#) to force a collision. The navy fired on and sunk the Chinese boat.

Two years later, a similar incident occurred when a navy vessel [fired shots](#) at a Chinese-flagged boat that refused to heed warning calls, sparking an eight-hour chase.

Major Sergio Almada, a retired senior officer in the Argentine Naval Prefecture, said these confrontations endanger Argentina's sailors and the crews of the ships being pursued. They are "acting with total disregard for life and respect for authority," Almada told InSight Crime.

Chinese authorities are known for not policing the country's deep-sea fleet, though [international maritime law](#) says they must. A [transshipment system](#) that allows the fleet to stay in international waters for months or even years paves the way for its rapacious behavior.

Refrigerated cargo ships – known as "reefers" – sidle along the fleet, collecting catch and bringing it to port. Vessels return with food, supplies and fuel.

In international waters, the vessels are not required to abide by Argentina's fishing quotas, standards or laws, said Dr. Rodolfo Werner, Argentina's senior advisor to the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition.

"There is no authority to apply because there is no law, no clear limits," Werner told InSight Crime. "The legal vacuum gives rise to a bunch of unscrupulous ships without any monitoring, especially Chinese, that do what they want."

The Fight Against IUU Fishing

After much outrage and criticism by governments and conservation agencies, China has [responded](#) to accusations of IUU fishing by claiming to impose stricter [penalties](#) on dark ships, tightening transshipment reporting requirements and banning off-season squid fishing near

Ecuador's and Argentina's waters. In November 2021, however, the fleet showed up off Argentina's coast a month before squid season opened.

[China](#) has long refused calls to declare and limit subsidies to its fishing fleet, without which ships would not have the fuel and other resources to fish nonstop so far from home ports.

Argentina has responded by stepping up its enforcement, purchasing four [ocean patrol vessels](#). The navy has also increased its [monitoring](#) capabilities by stationing a ship in the Strait of Magellan, a channel linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, to identify suspicious vessels.

Officials and conservation experts agree that international efforts and cooperation are critical in the fight against IUU fishing. They have repeatedly [decried](#) Uruguay's port of Montevideo for hosting transshipment vessels.

Javier Garcia, former director of Environmental Management of Water and Aquatic Ecosystems at Argentina's environment ministry, said the country has made advances in satellite monitoring, control capabilities and investigations.

But he acknowledges that Argentina has little recourse against fleets operating just outside its EEZ.

The constant plundering of marine life provokes a feeling of "impotence," Garcia told InSight Crime.

An Ocean of Lights

In satellite images of Earth, the edge of Argentina's sea shelf appears like an [airport runway](#) at night.

The lights are from Chinese [squid jiggers](#), which employ hundreds of [brilliant bulbs](#) to draw shortfin squid from the deep. The cephalopods, which grow up to a foot in length, have long bodies, short tentacles and arrow-like fins.

According to Oceana, half of the world's shortfin squid catch comes from Argentina's waters. Stocks [may](#) be declining.

Though the species has a short life cycle, the overexploitation of juvenile squid will diminish stocks or even exhaust them, said the fisheries expert.

"This situation can't continue eternally," he said. "If we don't act soon, we are not going to have anything more to defend."

Coluccio, the lobsterman, described the otherworldly lights as "infinite." When he listens to the radio at sea, he said, a cacophony of languages streams in: Portuguese, Russian, and, above all, Chinese. He said he finds it all unnerving.

“Really, one wouldn’t know if you are 300 kilometers from Argentina,” he said, “or 300 kilometers from China.”

Chile: The Merluza Mafia: Middlemen Profit Off Cod Catch

Chileans have a large appetite for merluza, a white-fleshed fish whose population has been decimated to the point that it could soon disappear from the country's dinner tables.

Overfishing of merluza – a form of hake – is rampant, and stocks [are being exhausted](#). Local fishers are blamed, but they are not the ones profiting from an illegal market estimated to be worth some [\\$60 million a year](#).

Instead, they sell to middlemen with freezer trucks, who buy undeclared fish at knockdown prices.

Rodrigo Oyanedel, a doctoral candidate at the University of Oxford who is investigating the overfishing of merluza, said there is a misconception that illegal catch passes straight from boats to restaurants.

The intermediaries “pull many strings, and they can have a lot of power and control prices,” Oyanedel told InSight Crime.

Merluza for the Masses

Merluza – a wide-mouthed, slender, silver fish in the cod family – was once abundant off Chile's shores. Small boats primarily fished merluza until the early part of the 20th century, when a series of economic crises struck Chile.

Cheap and nutritious, merluza soon became a staple of the Chilean diet. According to a [history of merluza](#) by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), campaigns promoted its consumption. Manufacturers turned it into fishmeal and oil.

By the 1940s, merluza was hauled in by industrial boats with large drift nets. The harvest [reached](#) more than 130,000 tons in 1968.

“It was like an Olympic race” to catch as much as possible, said Liesbeth van der Meer, vice president of Oceana, an ocean conservation nonprofit, in Chile.

Despite attempts to curb overfishing by placing a 45,000-ton limit from 1982 to 1990, boats continued to haul in merluza, [fishing nearly](#) 520,000 tons in 1996. By 2003, the fishery, [experts saw](#), was collapsing.

In 2014, Chile's Undersecretariat of Fisheries (Subsecretaría de Pesca -Subpesca) placed a [catch limit](#) of 19,000 tons on merluza común, the species also known as common hake. The government allotted 60 percent for industrial boats and the rest for artisanal ones.

“When they restricted the (catch) this way, the illegal activity appeared,” Cesar Astete, an expert on fisheries for Oceana in Chile, told InSight Crime.

Despite the drastic reduction in the catch limit, merluza común continues to be overexploited, according to [Subpesca data](#).

In 2020, Chile's catch limit [was set](#) at 37,000 tons. The nearly 2,200 artisanal boats that fish in the five-mile zone off Chile's coast were allotted just 15,000 tons of catch.

The head of an artisanal fishing cooperative who asked for anonymity for security reasons said “the fish quota is not enough” to survive.

A Bait and Switch

The middlemen keep their fishers loyal by providing bait, rods, reels, line and money advances. Even if others offer a better price, the fishers sell to these intermediaries, who are ready with instant cash.

The way the deals work allows much of the catch to go unregistered. For example, a middleman buys 100 kilograms of fish, but only ten are listed on a bill of sale from the fisherman, called an [Accreditation of Legal Origin](#) (Acreditación de Origen Legal). Bought at a knockdown price, the other 90 kilograms are never declared.

The middlemen falsify and recycle receipts, or create so many of them that the accreditations are impossible to distinguish.

“Even if they catch you, the fine is smaller if you have some type of paper,” Oyanedel, the doctoral candidate investigating the merluza trade, said.

Industrial merluza companies also drive overfishing. Regulations allow for the transfer of catch quotas for certain species, and companies buy the shares given to artisanal boats to increase their allotments. The fishers, however, still harvest under their legal merluza quotas.

“That produces a double count,” van der Meer told InSight Crime.

Most merluza for domestic consumption is sold at the Santiago fish market, Terminal Pesquero Metropolitano. Tracing the fish sold there, whether caught by industrial or artisanal boats, is impossible because “everything is mixed up,” van der Meer said. Open-air markets around the country also sell the fish indiscriminately.

The middlemen, who are often family members of fishers, profit from an “illogical and complex” distribution network, bringing multiple trucks a day to the market, van der Meer said.

“We don't have a tracking system,” she said, “and it's difficult to identify the intermediaries.”

The intermediaries were described as [mafia-like](#). Indeed, merluza catch has been found smuggled in false compartments of trucks. Drivers alert each other about enforcement checkpoints.

“They generate a lot of money,” said Oyanedel. “But they pay the fishers poorly.”

The head of the artisanal fishing cooperative said that a typical merluza boat brings in an average of about five tons of fish annually. The fish is processed into 180 boxes that sell for 10,000 Chilean pesos (\$12) each, for a profit of about 1,800,000 pesos (\$2,160). When divvied among a typical crew of four people, each pockets only 450,000 Chilean pesos, or \$553, per year.

“No one can live on that,” he said, after doing the calculation.

He knows that merluza stocks are being exhausted.

“The hake is the only resource left, at least here along the shore,” he said. “And the day it runs out, the artisanal fisherman dies out.”

Costa Rica: High Hopes for Radar Crash Against Reality of Illegal Fishing in Costa Rica

The installation of a radar tower on Costa Rica's Cocos Island heralded a new era for curbing illegal fishing in one of the world's most biodiverse ocean regions.

Rich in reef fish, sharks, tuna and other lucrative species, [poachers had been raiding](#) the island's waters for years.

The "radar was a way to say that up to here is the control and protection of the country," said Haydee Rodríguez, an environmental lawyer and Costa Rica's former vice-minister for Waters and Oceans.

The radar tower was meant to be the first of 11, forming a surveillance dragnet unlike anything seen in Latin America. Today it stands alone, a beacon to the difficulties small countries have in employing new technologies to monitor their vast waters.

The Rise and Fall of Costa Rica's Radar System

The radar system [was first proposed](#) in a 2012 report on control strategies for protecting Costa Rica's ocean territory, 11 times larger than the country itself. Cocos Island, about 550 kilometers off the country's Pacific coast, [provided the ideal spot](#) to showcase the first radar project, costing about \$3.4 million.

A UNESCO world heritage site, [Cocos Island National Park](#) hosts tropical rainforest, coral reefs, waterfalls and green mountains. Its waters -- with an abundance of fish, rays, turtles and sharks, including whitetips and giant hammerheads -- have been compared to an [underwater Jurassic Park](#).

Construction of the tower began in 2015. A [promotional video](#) shows the rigors of building the 100-foot tower atop the island. Supplies and workers are ferried there. Pullies and winches haul materials through the forest.

A [hydroelectric system and control room](#) -- replete with solar panels and satellite telecommunication -- are built to keep the radar running and provide round-the-clock monitoring capabilities.

"It was the Ferrari of radars at that time," Mónica Gamboa, of the conservation organization Forever Costa Rica (Costa Rica por Siempre), told InSight Crime.

Soon after the radar's deployment in 2017, Oswaldo Rosero, a specialist in maritime control and vigilance, saw a drastic reduction in illegal fishing.

"It was like magic. Immediately boats began to respect the boundaries of the zone because they knew we were going to see them," Rosero told InSight Crime.

But when oceanographer Sylvia Earle visited the ranger station on Cocos Island in May 2017, she heard the first concerns.

“We are seeing a lot of illegal fishing boats,” a ranger told her, according to a travelogue her organization Mission Blue [published](#) of her trip. But without patrol boats and gasoline, “we just see them and can’t do anything,” he said.

The radar was also difficult to maintain and repair. The institutions involved in keeping it functioning didn’t have the logistical capabilities to monitor the high-tech system, said Gamboa.

Once a [debt crisis](#) struck the country in 2017, the other planned towers were left in limbo.

“It was a very useful tool,” Gamboa said. “But at the end of the day, it was a tool without everything else that was required, and it was not going to give the results it could potentially give.”

Challenges facing Costa Rica

Illegal fishing remains a significant and growing threat to marine life on Cocos Island. A [report](#) published by Friends of Cocos Island (Amigos Isla del Coco - Faico), a non-governmental organization, found that seizures of illegal catch, interception of boats and prosecutions are minimal.

Damián Martínez, conservation director at the Costa Rican Fishing Federation (Federación Costarricense de Pesca – Fecop), said judicial institutions lack the capacity and knowledge to investigate and prosecute rogue boats.

“There is a lot of impunity,” he told InSight Crime.

Late last year, a [Global Marine Commodities](#) report described the government’s inaction in protecting sharks, tuna, swordfish and other deep-sea fish, despite presenting a plan to do so.

[Shark finning](#) still occurs in Costa Rica, thanks to laws not being enforced, according to the report. In 2021, the Central American nation accounted for four percent of the world’s shark fin exports, [according to Abrams](#).

Radars Get Second Chance

Whether the radar still functions is unclear, and the marine sanctuary around the island [has grown](#) to 61,500 square miles of ocean, about three times the size of mainland Costa Rica.

After hard-earned lessons, radar is again being examined to monitor the country’s marine reserves, said Gamboa. But it needs to be part of a comprehensive, cost-effective strategy.

Gamboa said that Costa Rica has been considered a world leader in conservation efforts. That needs to hold true for the oceans too, she said.

Ecuador: Loopholes Fuel Ecuador's Shark Fin Trade

When Ecuador President Guillermo Lasso announced the expansion of a marine reserve around the Galapagos Islands, he described the journey of a juvenile whale shark named “Esperanza,” or “Hope.”

Using a satellite tagging system, investigators had monitored the 10-foot female shark for nearly eight months. Then, silence.

“Her course intersected with a foreign fleet fishing on the border of Ecuador’s protected waters,” Lasso said in a January opinion piece for conservation news outlet [Mongabay](#), in which he described the reserve, where shark fishing is banned.

A cruel irony undercuts Lasso’s tale of Esperanza. Despite raising alarms about illegal fishing, Ecuador remains a hotspot for landing massive amounts of shark catch, and the nation is among the world’s biggest exporters of shark fins.

While the country prohibits the deliberate fishing of sharks, hundreds of thousands are harvested each year as bycatch. Ecuador’s laws place no limit on such “incidental catch,” and the valuable fins can be legally sold and exported.

“In the end, it is a legal loophole,” Alex Hearn, a professor at Universidad San Francisco de Quito who had been part of the team monitoring Esperanza, told InSight Crime.

Last year, Ecuador exported a record amount of shark fins. In 2021, its central bank [recorded nearly](#) 321 metric tons of exports, nearly quadruple some 90 tons exported in 2020. Revenues from shark fin also have shot up, from \$647,000 in 2013 to \$9.7 million in 2021.

The Ecuador government is “flirting dangerously with the concept that fin export is a good source of income,” said Cristina Cely, an environmental activist focused on ocean conservation in Ecuador.

Nets and Longlines

Shark fishing was banned in Ecuador in 2004. But three years later, then-President Rafael Correa [signed executive decree](#) 486, which allowed the sale of some types of shark bycatch.

Some 280,000 sharks are harvested each year in Ecuador’s waters, according to congressman Washington Varela, [who spoke](#) to legislators in September 2021 as the president of the National Assembly’s Biodiversity Commission.

Ecuador’s fishing fleet, composed of artisanal and industrial vessels, employs two fishing methods that catch sharks: large nets and longlines.

More than 100 industrial tuna boats employ nets that bring in hauls of up to 700 tons of marine life from the deep. An investigation by [Mongabay revealed](#) that the tuna fleet took in a record

haul of silky sharks in 2015, while more than 63,000 silky sharks, which are listed as [near threatened](#) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), were caught between 2014 and 2018.

Worse yet is the uncontrolled use of longline fishing gear, whose miles of baited hooks decimate shark populations. Some 20 percent of Ecuador's fishing boats, both industrial and artisanal, [use long lines](#) or *palangrera*.

The most destructive fleets active in Ecuador waters are *nodriza*, consisting of a mothership and up to a dozen towed fiberglass skiffs. These fleets, which can stay out to sea for three weeks, set thousands of hooks on lines attached to buoys. According to Pablo Guerrero, director of marine conservation for World Wildlife Fund-Ecuador (WWF), the *nodriza* fleets comprise a total of about 200 motherships and 3,000 skiffs.

When waters turn cold, the vessels deploy large hooks in deep waters to catch tuna. "Because of the cold water, there are more incidents with sharks," Guerrero told InSight Crime.

Oswaldo Rosero, a fisheries and maritime consultant in Ecuador, said vessels using longline gear can set hooks to be "very predatory."

Such boats have also been involved in illegal activities, such as drug running. In September 2021, Ecuador's coast guard stopped a large fishing vessel near the Galapagos marine reserve with a half-ton of drugs onboard. Eighty-two of the 90 dead fish onboard were sharks.

"It's absurd to have 90 percent of the haul consisting of shark," Rosero told InSight Crime.

The Fin Trade

In 2021, Ecuador accounted for 6.3 percent of the world's shark fin exports, up from 1.6 percent in 2016, [according to Abrams](#). Last year, a bill [proposing a one-year moratorium](#) on shark fishing and a four-year ban on shark exports was put before legislators, but it was [not approved](#).

Shark bycatch export is mainly composed of five species. Four of them – pelagic threshers, bigeye threshers, shortfin mako sharks and silky sharks – are protected by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species ([CITES](#)), an international agreement that regulates the wildlife trade.

Permits are required to export shark products. But enforcement is lacking, and fines are minimal. In 2020, an exporter of 26 tons of [shark fin made a brazen attempt](#) to obtain a retroactive CITES permit from Ecuador's Ministry of the Environment, Water and Ecological Transition (Ministerio del Ambiente, Agua y Transición Ecológica – MAATE) after the shipment was seized in Hong Kong. The exporter was fined just \$3,800 for the illegal shipment, which authorities estimated to be worth \$1.1 million.

"In Ecuador, it is better to commit illegal acts, be punished, and to continue with your illegal activity because it is cheaper," said Cely, the environmental activist.

Of nearly 320 tons of shark fins exported from Ecuador between 2013 and 2016, nearly all were sent to Hong Kong and Spain, according to Ecuador's central bank. Shark fin exports, though, shifted sharply to Peru the following year. During the past five years, almost all 755 tons of shark fins exported from Ecuador went to the neighboring country.

Fernando Rey, a coastal marine officer for WWF in Ecuador, said shipping companies have refused to transport shark fins directly from Ecuador, so most go through Peru and then are sent to countries in Asia.

Smuggling and [laundering opportunities](#) abound at the Ecuador-Peru border. Falsified permits are used. Shark fins are labeled as other seafood products. Quotas are exceeded. Fins of all kinds, including from protected species such as hammerhead sharks, are mixed.

Traffickers know the weaknesses in the fishing and border controls, according to Rey. They use laundering strategies to "legalize fins and then export them," he said.

In the port city of Manta, Cely said she saw firsthand the bloody business of finning. The smell of dead shark, she recalled, became more potent as carcasses were piled up "one after the other."

Ecuador's government contradicts itself by prohibiting shark fishing in the Galapagos Islands marine reserve, while these same sharks migrate to waters where they are then fished by local fleets and stripped of their fins at ports, Cely said.

"Sharks are wildlife in the Galapagos, but once they leave the Galapagos, we have to see them as a cash cow," she said. The "vision of them shouldn't change" based on geography.

Guyana: Struggling to Tame Lawless Waters

Guyana's coast guard commander freely admits that his surveillance and enforcement capabilities extend to just a fraction of the country's waters.

The sole vessel able to reach the deep seas of Guyana's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is a repurposed minesweeper, a British naval warship that has been moored for nearly a decade, in constant need of repairs.

The other several-odd boats in the coast guard's fleet are designed for offshore patrols of some 40 nautical miles, said Lt. Col. Michael Shahoud, head of the Guyana Defense Force Coast Guard. The country also lacks radar and camera systems to track boats.

"We have a severe challenge monitoring our maritime space," Shahoud told InSight Crime.

With nearly 460 kilometers (285 miles) of coastline, Guyana claims some 50,000 square nautical miles of ocean. Officials can't say for sure whether vessels are fishing illegally in the country's ungoverned waters. National Security Adviser Gerald Gouveia suspects that they are. Gouveia, a retired army pilot, recalled a Canadian aerospace company finding them easily during a demonstration of its surveillance aircraft for Guyana's military.

"I think they were able to pick up close to 50 or 60 unauthorized vessels in the Guyanese EEZ," he told InSight Crime.

In 2020, Guyana's coast guard had 11 boats, including the minesweeper warship, according to a [report](#) of its monitoring and control capabilities by illegal fishing expert Pramöd Ganapathiraju. A monitoring vessel commissioned to the Fisheries Department [came online](#) last year, and further additions are underway. The government is in the process of purchasing an [\\$11.5 million patrol boat](#). The 115-foot vessel, scheduled to be delivered later this year, would be able to patrol Guyana's EEZ.

The absence of a long-range vessel "is troubling," Ganapathiraju told InSight Crime. But he said he was most concerned about a lack of information about how often the fleet was being used in patrols and whether boats fishing illegally were intercepted.

"It costs a lot of money to run those vessels," he said of Guyana's coast guard. "Just looking at the number of vessels or size of the vessels is not enough to say they are doing a good job at sea."

While Guyana has long been one of South America's poorest countries, the small Caribbean nation is seeing a windfall from new [oil wealth](#). Firms that move oil are adding to monitoring capabilities at sea, including with private aircraft that shuttle between the oil fields and the port of Georgetown, said National Security Advisor Gouveia.

Oil revenue, he said, is also to be used to ramp up maritime operations. Still, "the coast guard, with or without oil, will be needing to do these things," Gouveia said.

Meanwhile, inland waters are anarchic, said Pameshwar Jainarine, chairman of the Upper Corentyne Fishermen's Co-operative Society. Fishing grounds can have upwards of 200 boats in areas meant to support some 80 vessels, said Jainarine, who blamed a licensing system run amok, where boats are registered indiscriminately. Illegal landing spots also exist, and catch data is scant.

"It's already maxed out," Jainarine told InSight Crime. "And then more and more boats are being put in our area of operations."

Piracy [has long been rife](#) in the lawless waters off Guyana, whose coastline sits between those of Suriname and Venezuela. Ambushes have turned deadly. A turf war among Guyana fishers was linked to a [fatal 2018 assault](#) in which fishers were burned, attacked with machetes and forced overboard, some with batteries strapped to their legs as weights.

Local fishers [have been robbed](#) of boats, expensive outboard motors and hundreds of dollars [of fish](#) and [cash](#).

In March of last year, officials said authorities had increased patrols along the country's northwestern coast and rivers. According to Stabroek News, a Guyanese news outlet, fishers in the Waini River area, which abuts Venezuela, were reportedly being [preyed upon by armed gangs](#) from the neighboring country.

Fisherman Basdeo Sharma said he and his fishing colleagues still feel unprotected.

"When we go out there, we are defenseless," he told InSight Crime. "We like sitting ducks on the water."

Jamaica: Overharvesting and Poaching Devastate Fisheries

For more than half a century, Ephraim Walters has fished the southern coast of Jamaica. But he rarely heads out any longer.

With inland waters almost barren, Walters, who goes by the nickname Frame, said he must travel farther out to sea, some 100 kilometers, spending three to five days and using up to 100 gallons of fuel.

“Sometimes you go out and you don’t catch a thing, and you can’t buy back the gas you use to go out,” the father of nine told InSight Crime.

Jamaican fishers, mostly unlicensed and largely ungoverned, are taking what they can from the country’s waters, draining them of shad, yellowtail, parrot, snapper and other types of reef fish. They use destructive techniques, including small-mesh nets that scrape the ocean floor of all life. Undersized fish are harvested indiscriminately, and there are no catch limits.

In deep waters, foreign vessels, some of them carrying dozens of divers, poach lobster and conch, a type of shellfish that was on the brink of collapse a few years ago, Jamaican fishers and conservation officials told InSight Crime.

“Honduran and Nicaraguan boats are there every evening and then they go home in the early morning,” said Shawn Taylor, the head of the Jamaica Fishermen Cooperative Union.

While overexploitation has left Jamaica’s waters depleted of reef fish, natural disasters and development have also decimated its fisheries.

Hurricanes [have destroyed](#) coral reefs, smashing, dislodging and burying them under sediment. Development projects have drained wetlands and pumped sewage into the sea. Coral disease, sea-urchin die-off, and coral bleaching have also left reefs [severely damaged](#). But the reefs are slowly recovering, said marine biologist Karl Aiken, Jamaica’s chair to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES), a treaty meant to regulate and monitor wildlife trade.

A combination of factors has led to declines in Jamaica’s fisheries, Aiken said, but “the most important one has been very high levels of intense fishing on the islands’ fish stocks, both on our own shelf but also offshore.”

Plenty of Fish in the Sea?

Some 30 years ago, Walters sailed his boat down the coast from his hometown of Belmont to Rocky Point, a community on the island’s south coast. He never left.

Fishers headed out to sea every day then, fishing in the shallow waters of the 24-kilometer wide sea shelf. They made enough to build homes, support their families and send their children to school, he said.

“Dropping the net in the bay, we would pull it together onto the shore with a whole lot of fish,” he said. “But these days we have to go farther out to sea for far less.”

Jamaica’s waters are composed of 274,000 square kilometers of maritime space, about 25 times the size of its mainland, according to André Kong, who served as director of fisheries in the Ministry of Agriculture from 2011 to 2019.

“What makes it all so difficult is the amount of landing sites,” Kong said. “They land at many places at all different hours of the night, and there is no regulation for them to report even when they come back.”

The number of fishers registered in Jamaica is unclear. According to a [report](#) commissioned by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), about 40,000 Jamaican fishers make their living from the sea. But Jamaica’s National Fisheries Authority has licensed only 26,000 of them.

Gavin Bellamy, head of the government’s National Fisheries Authority, acknowledges that data is lacking. But he said a new online registration system, which will create a database of boats and licensed fishers, will come online soon. He said this would eliminate weaknesses in data collection, monitoring, and enforcement. Fishers will also be instructed on new regulations. Proposals include quotas and catch sizes.

Current regulations limit specific techniques, such as spearfishing, and equipment, such as the size of fish nets. Fishing is prohibited in 18 sanctuaries. Three are in the Portland Bright Protected Area, which includes a significant portion of Jamaica’s shallow shelf. Ingrid Parchment, the executive director of the foundation that manages the protected area, said that nearly 70 percent of boats stopped in the sanctuaries show no registration marks. The fishers themselves often lack any personal identification.

“We even have had cases where persons who are caught fishing in the sanctuary were charged and paid the fines, and then the following week they were back in the sanctuary with another boat,” Parchment told InSight Crime.

Poaching Conch off Pedro Cay

Pedro Cay is a small cluster of islets, rocky formations and uninhabited islands, whose southwest waters, known as Pedro Banks, are home to the country’s largest conch fishery. In 2019, conch harvesting was banned after a study revealed that the fishery was collapsing.

However, conch populations on Pedro Banks have slowly recovered, allowing for a five-month season, which resumed last year and began again in April. There is a catch limit of 300 tons for industrial boats and 50 tons for artisanal fishers. The limits – while seemingly high – are still lower than the pre-closure quotas, said Aiken.

The waters around Morant Cays, islands on the east coast, also contain a conch fishery that has been decimated by overfishing, said Gladstone White, Jamaica's representative to the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Network Organizations (CNFO). He criticized the decision to resume conch harvests, saying that the two-year ban was insufficient.

Pedro Banks is vast, about two-thirds the size of Jamaica's mainland. The country's coast guard comprises only five stations, just one of which is offshore.

Fishers have reported boats from nearby Honduras and Nicaragua poaching the waters along the western end of the banks, with some staying up to a week. The vessels, mostly converted shrimp trawlers, carry large numbers of divers who vacuum the seafloor.

Between January 2011 and March 2019, authorities intercepted ten foreign vessels, according to then Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Audley Shaw, who told regional officials last year that the arrests accounted for just a fraction of the foreign fishing vessels operating illegally in Jamaican waters during that time.

On occasions when foreign boats are intercepted, authorities have found not just conch and lobster but sea cucumber in its holds.

"They take everything," Aiken said of the divers. "These poachers are highly irresponsible."

Some Jamaican fishers have colluded with the foreign captains to help them elude the coast guard. Taylor, the head of the fishing cooperative, complained that the lack of licenses provided to fishers drives them to engage in such illegal practices.

"Because our fishers can't get a license," he said, "they work with foreign (vessels) to come and take up the things which are banned here."

At 70, Walters still dives for conch and lobster when he receives his licensed quota. He also recovers fish pots that he sets 18 meters (60 feet) below the water's surface.

Standing in his equipment-shed-turned-camp, Walters was surrounded by engines and other gear. The smell of a boiling pot of fish-tea permeated the air.

Fishing is "hardly worth the effort," he said.

Panama: Lending the Flag to Most Destructive Fishing Ships

When the Chinese fishing fleet was discovered near Ecuador's Galapagos Islands, home to some of the world's most endangered species, its 250-odd vessels were not all flagged to China. Some flew [Panama's](#) flag.

They did so under an old seafaring practice known as flags of convenience. Once primarily a way to dodge taxes, flags of convenience now [provide cover](#) and facilitate illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices, such as transshipments and [laundering](#) the catch of boats that have turned off their transponders.

The Ecuadorian navy [announced](#) that it had spotted the Chinese fleet on July 16, 2020. The boats flying Panama's flags were shuttling catches to ports and hauling back [fuel and supplies](#). Known as "reefers," these refrigerated cargo vessels receive tons of fish and often process and package it onboard, making it easy to mix illegal catch with legal fish, according to Global Fishing Watch.

The fishing system used by the Chinese fleet -- called transshipment -- allows boats to stay out to sea [for months](#) and even years, plundering waters. Operating far from law enforcement, fleets that depend on transshipments also have some of the [worst labor abuses](#).

Flag of Convenience

The small Central American nation of Panama has the largest fleet of merchant ships globally. In 2021, the country's registry had 7,980 vessels, equating to about eight percent of the global fleet, according to a [United Nations report](#) on maritime transport.

Panama is attractive to ship owners due to its [open registry](#), which is low cost, allows people of all nationalities to join and imposes few barriers on the ship's age. Income from Panama-flagged ships is not taxed.

Ships can also be registered under Panamanian companies, offering shipowners anonymity. This can help them evade sanctions, since fleets can be registered under multiple companies, a practice known as "associated vessels."

The registry is lucrative for Panama, bringing between [\\$125 to \\$150 million a year](#) in services and taxes. Registrations alone earned the country some [\\$87.3 million](#) in 2021.

The Transport Workers Union has in the past accused Panama's flag policies of providing cover for ships that commit [labor abuses](#). Panamanian-flagged ships have also been linked to environmental disasters, such as a Greek-owned cargo ship with [a massive oil leak](#). The March [sinking](#) of a Panamanian flagged ship carrying thousands of luxury cars and tons of fuel raised concerns about [pollutants](#) that could harm marine life and leak into the ocean.

The European Union (EU) [gave](#) Panama a "yellow card" – or warning – in 2019, identifying it as a non-cooperative country in the fight against IUU fishing.

The commission responsible for issuing the warning said in a statement that it had detected “serious deficiencies in the mechanisms established by the country to ensure compliance with its international obligations as a flag State.”

The small country lacks the ability to supervise its massive number of flagged ships, said José María Lezcano, an expert in maritime law.

“We have limited resources, and we don’t have that inspection capacity,” he told InSight Crime.

There is little political will for creating extra roadblocks in the system, given that shipowners may look to other countries, such as the West African nation of Liberia, which has even laxer regulations.

Rampant [corruption](#) also has been discovered within The Panama Maritime Authority (Autoridad Marítima de Panamá -AMP), the government agency that issues ship licenses.

The Silk Road

A century ago, when the United States controlled the Panama Canal, US-owned vessels were the first foreign ships to register under Panama’s flag. More recently, ships from Asia have predominated.

According to a 2018 [study](#), nearly half of the ships in Panama’s registry were Japanese owned. About nine percent were Chinese owned.

In 2018, Panama [reached a maritime agreement](#) with China, which granted it favored nation status and provided advantages to shipowners registered under Panama’s flag. Last year, Panama and China signed [a new agreement that](#) included a provision granting “free and unhindered access for Panamanian-flagged vessels for cargo traffic to and from China.”

InSight Crime queried the AMP as to whether an increase in Chinese registrations had been reported since these agreements went into effect but received no answer.

The Chinese distant water fishing fleet has long been cloaked in secrecy.

China is the world’s largest consumer of fish. A report by the University of Stockholm found that by 2030, [the country will need between six to 18 million tons](#) of additional fish per year to meet growing demand.

China also leads the world by far in [fish exports and wild catch](#), according to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization. In 2018, China’s wild catch was 12.7 million tons, about 15 percent of the global total.

Researchers with the Overseas Development Institute, a London-based think tank, recently estimated the Chinese distant water fishing fleet’s size at nearly 17,000 vessels. According to

[their study](#), which analyzed large transponder data sets and was published in June 2020, about 1,000 vessels operating with the fleet are flagged to other countries.

Fifty-two were flagged to Panama, the most of any Latin American country, and eight of those have been suspected of involvement in IUU fishing.

“In this subgroup of ships that were on blacklists, we saw the proportion of flags of convenience go up a lot,” Miren Gutiérrez, one of the report’s authors, told InSight Crime.

On the Lookout in the Pacific

When Ecuadorean officials announced that [Panamanian-flagged vessels](#) were among the [giant fleet near the Galapagos](#), Panama’s Aquatic Resources Authority (Autoridad de Recursos Acuáticos de Panamá – ARAP), the agency responsible for overseeing the Panamanian fleet, issued a memo reiterating its "rejection of IUU fishing."

The agency also stated that it [was monitoring](#) the fleet to ensure that it complied with international regulations and agreements.

InSight Crime sent a series of questions to the agency, asking, among other things, whether it took any further actions after the Galapagos incident.

Flor Torrijos, director of ARAP, replied in an email that “Ecuador did not formalize in Panama a notification or investigation into Panamanian-flagged vessels that may have engaged in activities to the detriment of regional, national or international measures.”

Last year, Panama [announced](#) that it would bar 169 boats on an international blacklist of vessels from docking at its ports. The country also said it would prohibit vessels allegedly engaged in IUU fishing from receiving licenses.

Transshipment -- which enables bad actors and facilitates overfishing -- is not illegal. However, it would not be possible without support vessels like refrigerated cargo ships, which Panama continues to license.

A [study](#) by Global Fishing Watch of the Chinese distant water fleet’s operations in the Southeast Pacific identified 59 such support vessels: 41 for transport and 18 bunkers. More than half were flagged to Panama.

Suriname: Haven for Smugglers and Illegal Fishers

A Suriname fishmonger in the coastal city of Nieuw Nickerie says he pays 250,000 Surinamese dollars, or about \$12,000, each year for his processing business and fleet.

Saying that it's the only way to recoup costs, the vendor acknowledges an illegal trade in fishing permits. Fishers from neighboring Guyana often work under the licenses, renting them from boat owners for a few thousand dollars.

"I have a permit, you have a boat. I say, 'take the permit, use the boat, bring me the fish,'" the vendor, whose name is being withheld due to his comments on illicit acts including smuggling, told InSight Crime.

Suriname – wedged among Guyana, French Guiana and Brazil – has [strict laws](#) on fishing licenses, including one that says permits may only be issued to Surinamese vessels and that they are non-transferable. In 2020 the Ministry of Agriculture, Husbandry and Fisheries issued just over [930 artisanal fishing permits](#). Due to the trade in licenses, however, many more boats are fishing in Suriname's waters.

Licenses are readily duplicated, said Satesh Kodai, chairman of the Suriname National Fisherfolk Organization. He estimated that for every 100 permits rented to Guyanese fishers, three to four hundred boats are working under them. He said that Guyanese fishers who illegally rent licenses also duplicate them to sell to their compatriots.

"Even a boat owner is not aware how many times their permits are being copied," Kodai told InSight Crime.

Fish Smuggled to Guyana

Suriname's artisanal fishers can apply for two types of licenses. An inland navigation license allows for fishing in rivers, including the estuary, and shallow coastal waters. A Suriname Coast license, or SK license for its Dutch acronym, permits fishing in offshore zones in waters up to 16.5 meters deep. In 2020, the inland fleet received some 470 permits and the coastal one 450, according to the latest [fisheries management plan](#).

Boats provided SK licenses are typically large wooden vessels that can stay out to sea for up to three weeks, fishing for tuna, butterfish, Asian sea bass and other large fish.

The more valuable SK licenses are most often rented to Guyanese boats. Guyana news organizations have reported that fishers [pay up to \\$4,000](#) for a permit. These boats also illegally land their catch in Guyana.

Dew Jaddoe, the chief executive officer of a fish processing plant in the coastal municipality of Nickerie and a former fisheries director, said that it is well known, including to the ministry, "that SK boats are smuggling fish." According to the fisheries plan, about a quarter of SK-licensed boats are landing their catch in Guyana.

“The SK boats need to be checked,” Jaddoe told InSight Crime.

But maritime patrol resources are limited.

“We try to do patrols at least twice a month if we have enough petrol,” Radjoe Bholá, director of the Suriname Coast Guard, told InSight Crime

“Almost every patrol, we bring in one or two illegal boats, sometimes six or seven,” Bholá said. “We come across Guyanese and Venezuelan illegal fishing boats, but most of the violations are actually Surinamese who go fishing without a permit.”

Authorities struggle to catch Guyana fishers using illegal permits, because most who work for Suriname boat owners are Guyanese, said Mohamedsafiek Gowrie, the chairman of the National Assembly’s Committee on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries.

“The Guyanese person fishing in the water doesn’t honestly indicate to the police, ‘I paid a huge amount for this license,’” Gowrie told InSight Crime.

Contraband on the Corentyne River

The mouth of the Corentyne River – near the small city of Nieuw Nickerie -- is cluttered and busy with fishing boats.

A lone small speedboat is all that Major Wim Daal, commander of the National Army’s Western Region, has for patrols. The Nickerie district, which borders the Atlantic Ocean and Corentyne River, lacks even a coast guard station.

“Suriname has a strict fishing policy, but we lack the resources to apply the law,” Daal told InSight Crime.

A brisk smuggling trade occurs along the Corentyne. Illegal gold [is smuggled](#) to Suriname. Clothing, electronics, alcohol, chickens and fuel [are all moved](#) into Guyana.

A business owner on the banks of the Nickerie river who asked for anonymity because of fear of reprisals showed a cellphone video of a group of Guyanese fishers rapidly stripping a pick-up. Dashboard, seats, door, engine, steering wheel and exhaust pipe disappear into the belly of a fishing boat docked near a jetty.

“You would think they’d do something like that at night, quietly. This was the middle of the day. Apparently, they have nothing to fear,” he said.

The businessman has delivered evidence of illegal fishing and smuggling to local officials and national agencies but has been met by a wall of silence.

InSight Crime contacted Suriname’s Ministry of Agriculture, Husbandry and Fisheries numerous times to discuss illegal licenses and smuggling but did not receive a reply.

“On the Corantyne, everything is smuggled,” said the fish vendor. “You have people crossing illegally, smuggling, transit and illegal fishing. It’s common knowledge.”

Much of the contraband is moved in boats designed to look like fishing vessels. “They put a fishing net on the deck, and you start thinking it’s a fishing boat. They even may have a permit,” the fish vendor said.

Uruguay: At Port of Montevideo, A Deadly Circle of Fishing and Labor Abuses

It was the Day of the Dead when the body of Raúl Delgado's brother was carried from the Portuguese-flagged fishing vessel the Verdemilho.

Both had been serving as ship crew members when Delgado's brother, Celso, grew increasingly sick. Unable to speak, he lay on the floor, gasping for air.

"I had to be there with a piece of cardboard fanning him because he couldn't breathe," Delgado told InSight Crime.

On November 2, 2020, the boat finally docked at Uruguay's port of Montevideo. Celso had already been dead for a day.

Between 2013 and 2021, Montevideo was the last port of call for 59 deceased fishing crew members – or one about every month and a half, according to figures provided to InSight Crime by the National Naval Prefecture ([Prefectura Nacional Naval](#)). Conservation and human rights groups have long accused the port of hosting vessels known to engage in labor abuse at sea. Crew members have been beaten, locked aboard ships, starved and forced to work for days without sleep.

They have also been refused necessary medical treatment, which is what Delgado, who is from Peru, alleges happened to his brother.

"The captain didn't want to return to land, because what interested him most was filling the boat," Delgado said.

A Port with a Bad Reputation

At the southern tip of the country, Uruguay's port of Montevideo serves as a clearinghouse for fishing fleets operating in the South Atlantic. Deep-sea fishing boats at the port [unloaded nearly 76,000 tons of frozen fish](#) in 2021, according to Uruguayan port administration data.

Uruguay scores quite well on international measures of IUU fishing, such as the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's IUU Fishing Index. According to the index, Uruguay is among the 25 best countries in the world in their efforts to counter IUU fishing.²³

Yet despite this strong national record, the Montevideo port is a notorious hub for catch transferred at sea. Refrigerated cargo ships meet fishing fleets, shuttling them supplies and receiving catch. The rapacious system – called transshipment -- abets illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices.

A 2017 report by [Oceana](#), an international non-profit dedicated to ocean conservation, exposed the port as the [second most](#) visited by transshipment vessels.

Distant-water fishing fleets employ the transshipment system to fish for months just outside a country's 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Boats turn off transponders known as [automatic identification systems \(AIS\)](#), which broadcast a ship's identity and position, to illegally Hoover waters inside exclusive zones. A 2021 [Oceana study](#) examined transponder data from 800 vessels fishing within 20 nautical miles of Argentina's EEZ between January 2018 and April 2021. Just over 30 percent of the boats that shut off their AIS transponders docked at the port of Montevideo.

"The foreign fleets leave a lot of money in the port," said Mariana Silvera, an Uruguay consultant to the National Geographic program Pristine Seas.

"For that reason, it's not convenient to do things correctly and carry out inspections and controls," Silvera told InSight Crime.

IUU Fishing and Labor Abuse

Illegal fishing is known to be coupled with other crimes, particularly labor abuse at sea.

The campaign [Oceanosanos](#), which focuses on ocean conservation and illegal fishing in Uruguay, compiled a [2018 report](#) of boats accused of misconduct that docked at the port of Montevideo. Accounts included a Taiwanese fishing ship that visited the port twice in 2017 before being inspected in South Africa, where authorities documented that crew members had been "beaten, suffered mistreatment and were not paid the agreed amount."

In 2014, more than two dozen African crew members fled a Chinese fishing ship at Montevideo. They said they had been attacked with tools, and their legs showed signs of being shackled.

Various nationalities crew the vessels that dock at Montevideo, said Jessica Sparks, the associate director of the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, UK.

"It's a big port for vessels that are out at sea for very long periods, and that, of course, escalates risk" of abuse, Sparks told InSight Crime.

The port serves as a hub for contracting agencies that bring in crew members from Russia, Peru, Indonesia, Africa and elsewhere, said Alexis Pintos, spokesman for the National Union of Seafarers and Allied Workers in Uruguay (Sindicato Único de Trabajadores del Mar y Afines - SUNTMA).

On the rare occasions when abuse is reported, it's often to the union.

"Crew members of all nationalities have told us about having their documents confiscated, of mistreatment, of going without food," said Pintos. Little is done to counter misconduct, the SUNTMA spokesman said.

"Since the flag is not Uruguayan, we look the other way," Pintos told InSight Crime.

The Last Port of Call

Dead crew members don't speak. Investigations are rare. Delgado, though, knew his brother had died needlessly.

When the *Verdemilho* arrived at the Montevideo port about a month before Celso's death, he had already developed a strong cough, a symptom of COVID-19. Delgado asked the captain that his brother be allowed to see a doctor, but the captain refused.

The boat returned to the Atlantic, trawling for fish. A week later, Celso's health worsened. Delgado said he wishes he had disobeyed the captain, who later told his brother when they were returning to sea that a COVID-19 diagnosis would have caused the ship to be quarantined for weeks.

Delgado has lodged a formal criminal complaint with Uruguayan authorities.

"I made the complaint because of how my brother was treated, because I don't want this to happen to other mariners -- that they die without being attended by a doctor," he said.

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Assessment



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