

Forum: SDG14

Issue: Measures to protect oceans from overexploitation

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Introduction

The oceans and their respective marine ecosystems and lifeforms cover over 70% of Earth's surface¹ and serve as the lifeblood of the planet's systems regulating climate, biodiversity, supporting coastal communities and islands, and providing food and livelihoods for millions¹. Yet these ecosystems face mounting stress from human activity, and one of the most urgent challenges is overexploitation of this natural resource, extracting marine resources at rates that exceed the capacity for natural regeneration¹. This report aims to equip delegates with a clear, unbiased overview of the scientific, policy, and governance dimensions of ocean overexploitation, how they connect to the UN, its importance, and other relevant aspects.

Over the past decades, the proportion of global fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels has declined from approximately 90 % in the 1970s to about 62.3 % in 2021^{1 3}, its causes being mainly overfishing, poor regulation, habitat loss, pollution, and other general climate pressures.³ The phenomenon of overcapacity (excessive fishing fleets), destructive fishing gear (like for example bottom trawling), and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing further increase the heavy pressure on marine ecosystems.^{1 5} The 2030 Agenda and SDG 14 (The UN Sustainable Development Goal this agenda was based on) create a set of interlinked targets for the overall sustainable management of marine resources that propose solutions like the expansion of marine protected areas (Target 14.5), elimination of harmful fisheries subsidies (Target 14.6), and improved scientific knowledge (Target 14.a)³. Significant implementation gaps still exist despite advancements like the growing use of marine spatial planning, new international agreements (like the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies), and enhanced monitoring tools.³

Definition of Key Terms

SDG14

The 14th Sustainable Development Goal, named 'Life Below Water' by the United Nations, seeks to "conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development" as defined verbatim by the UN themselves.³

Overexploitation

The process of extracting a renewable biological resource (e.g. fish stocks) at a rate that exceeds its capacity to regenerate, eventually driving decline, ecosystem imbalance, or collapse.¹¹

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing

Unlawful fishing means taking fish against the rules, whether those are a country's own regulations or agreements made globally to protect ocean life⁸. Illegal fishing happens when people don't truthfully share their catches with authorities, or even don't report them at all, breaking the law.⁸

Fishing without rules or Unregulated (IUU) fishing happens where there aren't any limits or oversight, typically by boats operating outside legal control, perhaps under a flag from a country uninvolved in setting standards.

Fisheries Subsidies / Harmful Subsidies

Governments sometimes help fisheries with money or rules in the form of subsidies, for example fuel discounts, tax relief, direct payments, or lending³, making it cheaper or more lucrative to fish for these fisheries. Certain aid can bolster responsible practices like tracking or study; however, damaging subsidies encourage too many boats, excessive catches, or illegal angling.³

Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMO)

Intergovernmental organizations formed by governments work to oversee fish populations and population density per waterbody, particularly those that move around a lot or exist beyond national waters. These groups establish regulations, catch limits, then track how well countries are following them when fishing.

Marine Protected Area (MPA)

A clearly defined geographical marine zone designated to be protected and to achieve long-term conservation of nature, ecosystem services, and cultural values³. MPAs can restrict or regulate extractive activities (fishing, mining) to preserve biodiversity and habitat resilience in that particular region of MPA.³

UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea)

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, also called the Law of the Sea Convention or the Law of the Sea Treaty, is an international treaty adopted in 1982 that establishes a legal framework for all marine and maritime activities.³

High Seas

Marine areas beyond national jurisdiction (i.e. beyond the 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zones). Approximately 45 % of the world's ocean area constitutes the high seas. Because of jurisdictional challenges and weak enforcement, high seas fisheries are especially vulnerable to unregulated fishing and overexploitation.

Background Information

Important Statistics and Trends

Global Catch and Dependence

- The world's fisheries produce on the order of 200 million tonnes of fish and seafood annually (combining wild-catch and aquaculture)¹
- Wild capture still remains a large share of marine resource extraction, and many coastal and island communities are heavily dependent on fisheries for food security, nutrition, and livelihoods.¹

State of fish stocks

- According to the FAO and other assessments, approximately 90 % of global fish stocks are either fully exploited or overexploited (i.e., they are at or beyond sustainable limits)³
- In recent decades, the proportion of stocks overfished has risen substantially. For example, stocks fished at unsustainable levels rose from about 10 % in 1974 to over 33 % by 2015.^{11 12}
- Some newer estimates suggest 34 % of marine fish stocks being overfished (with additional stocks at maximum capacity).^{1 2}

IUU fishing magnitude

- IUU fishing is estimated to account for roughly 20 % of global marine catches (i.e. about one in five fish caught)⁵
- Annual losses from IUU fishing are estimated between 11 to 26 million tonnes of fish, with an economic value of USD 10 to 23 billion^{6 7 9 10}
- Some studies suggest the hidden “dark figure” may push losses (in economic terms) as high as USD 36.4 billion per year.

- Monitoring trends show that global risk of IUU fishing remains elevated: the 2023 IUU Fishing Risk Index score is 2.28 out of 5 (where higher is worse), up from 2.24 in 2021, indicating slight deterioration overall.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United Nations / DOALOS (Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea)

Coordinates implementation of UNCLOS and provides technical/legal support on maritime governance³.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

Oversees global fisheries management guidelines, data collection, and sustainable aquaculture practices^{1 3}.

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

Sets rules for ship safety, marine pollution prevention, and ballast water management.³

European Union (EU)

Advocates for international marine governance and funds global sustainable fisheries and marine protected areas.³

United States

A leading fishing nation and funder of marine science; strongly involved in combating IUU (illegal, unreported, unregulated) fishing, though not a party to UNCLOS.¹²

China

The world's largest seafood producer and consumer, often criticised for distant-water fleets and subsidies; also investing in marine conservation technology.³

Japan

A major fishing nation, balancing traditional fishing interests with global commitments to sustainability and whaling controversies.³

India

Rapidly expanding its blue economy and marine resource use, while also being a strong advocate for SIDS and equity in ocean governance.³

Viable Solutions

To address the issue, solutions need to be implemented in a lot of sectors and on a lot of fronts: rules, nature, money, people, in a cohesive way, all together, not separately.

Primarily, better fishing rules matter. Nations should set catch limits grounded in research, also designate times when fishing stops, guaranteeing healthy fish populations endure. Gear rules (like safety devices for turtles or stopping damaging seabed nets) lessen unwanted catches alongside protecting ocean floors. Equally important, shifting money away from boosting fleets toward responsible fisheries could reset priorities.

Tackling unlawful, hidden, or uncontrolled fishing (IUU fishing as defined and detailed on above), roughly a fifth of everything caught worldwide, is key. Better watchfulness alongside stricter rules, utilizing satellites, robotic flyers, plus ship trackers, should discourage these practices and possibly make it easier to act on punishing them. To keep illegal fishing a serious charge, authorities check ships at ports, track seafood origins, collaborate internationally on intel. Those who repeatedly break the rules face stiffer fines; honest fishers get recognized for their openness. Utilize a mix of incentives for those who fish ethically as well as restrictions, fines and charges for those who don't in order to have IUU fishing recognized as a truly bad crime.

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