



Sardines are one of the most common species of fish used to make fishmeal.

News Illegal Fishing

Ecuador Illegal Fishermen Target Sardines, Anchovies Amid Fishmeal Boom

by Gabrielle Gorder 27 Oct 2022



Illegal fishing vessels off the coast of Ecuador are increasingly harvesting smaller marine species in response to rising global demand for fishmeal, risking significant environmental and economic disruption by targeting the lower levels of the food chain.

Ecuadorian authorities issued at least 44 alerts of unauthorized industrial fishing in the protected Cantagallo-Machalilla marine reserve, located in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Ecuador's Manabí province, between late 2020 and early 2022, according to [Mongabay](#).

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Most of the vessels involved were reportedly dedicated to catching small fish such as anchovies or sardines. These smaller fish are ground up to produce fishmeal, a dry powder [used](#) for animal feed and food for farmed fish.

The problem is not Ecuador's alone. In Peru, where millions of tons of anchovy are fished legally every year, 150,000 tons of Peruvian anchoveta were diverted in 2019 to produce fishmeal, according to a [study](#) by non-governmental organization Oceana. At least 62 fish processing facilities were involved in turning the illegal catch into fishmeal.

That same year, the US imported around \$2.4 billion in illegally caught fish products, according to a [report](#) by the US International Trade Commission. That report estimated that 9% of all fishmeal in the United States came from illegal catch.

InSight Crime Analysis

The spread of illegal fishing targeting smaller species to produce fishmeal risks devastating consequences for the local environment and economy.

Overfishing small fish like anchovies and sardines has a domino effect on the maritime food chain. Larger fish — like the giant stingrays and other species the Cantagallo-Machalilla reserve was created to protect — rely on anchovies and sardines for food. Catching huge hauls of these smaller species for fishmeal endangers the very animals the reserve is meant to protect.

Fishmeal is one of Ecuador's fastest-growing economies, and the country is

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already among the world's top producers. Industry experts expect global demand for fishmeal to continue to grow in coming years, meaning the incentive to scoop up small fish illegally will likely also increase.

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Ecuadorean authorities have taken some steps to curb the practice. In 2020, the country [ratified a law](#) regarding the development of aquaculture and fisheries, stating that resources for human consumption cannot be used for processing fishmeal.

But enforcement has been lax. Of the 64 administrative proceedings reportedly opened to investigate alerts, only one has resulted in a sanction, according to figures from Peru's Ministry of Production quoted by Mongabay. Several vessels fishing in the Cantagallo-Machalilla reserve have been accused of repeat offenses but have faced [no punishment](#).

"There is a lot of impunity," Cristina Cely, an environmental activist from Ecuador, told InSight Crime. "We know there are often reports of fishing vessels in these areas, and the authorities still do not conduct inspections. This means these activities will continue because those actors know they will not be penalized."

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