

Report: Illegal fishing and labor abuse rampant in China's Indian Ocean fleet

Mongabay Series: Oceans

## in 🔉 🗹 🗌 by Elizabeth Claire Alberts on 6 June 2024



fishing activities by its distant-water fleet, but evidence suggests that China isn't taking adequate action to stop these issues. At the recent meeting of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), China tried to introduce a proposal that would limit scrutiny of its distant-water fleet, but this was rejected by other parties to the commission — a move that founder and CEO of EJF called a "big win" in the ongoing work to

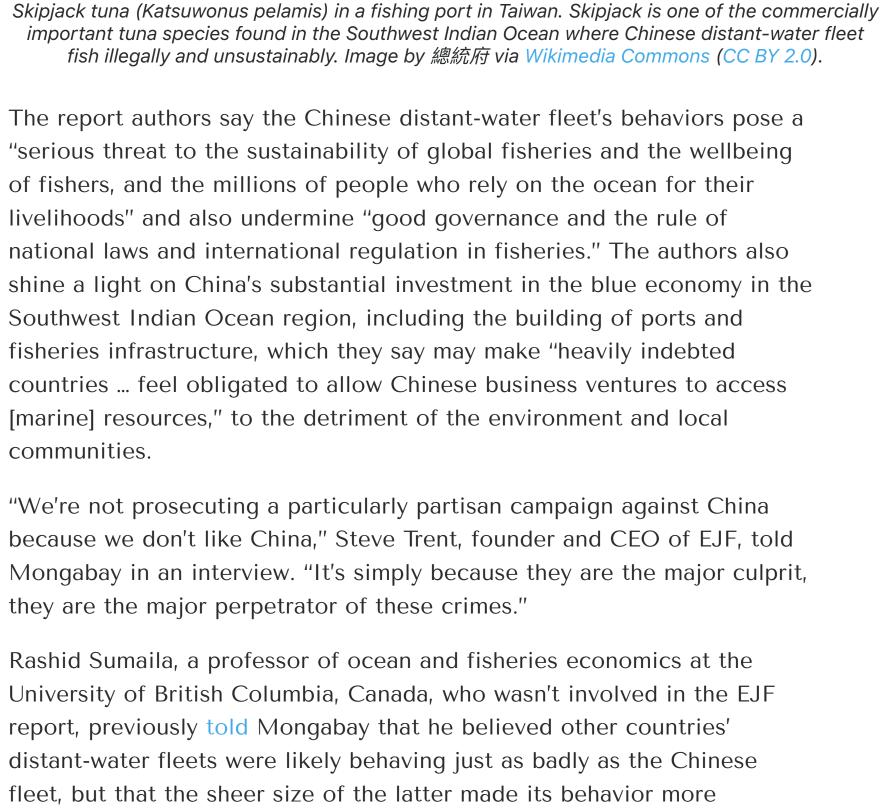
Southwest Indian Ocean region could contribute to these problems by

• China has previously stated that it has a "zero-tolerance" approach to illegal

obligating indebted states to grant fishing rights to Chinese vessels.

- document illegal fishing activities. The Chinese distant-water fishing fleet is a formidable force. For one
- many more. These vessels, many of which are propped up by government subsidies, are present in all of the world's major oceans and countless coastal areas. The fleet's sheer size and geographical span means it takes a sizeable volume of marine fish out of the sea: an estimated 4 million metric tons yearly.
- Experts say the Chinese distant-water fleet also participates in a disproportionate amount of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and exploitative practices such as shark finning and human rights violations. Previous reporting on these issues has usually focused on parts of the world such as the coastal waters of West Africa, or around the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Latin American countries like

organization, highlights the illegal and unsustainable activities of the Chinese distant-water fleet in the Southwest Indian Ocean, a global hotspot for marine biodiversity and home to commercially important tuna species like yellowfin (*Thunnus albacares*), skipjack (*Katsuwonus pelamis*) and bigeye (Thunnus obesus). Published in April, the EJF report draws primarily from crew testimonials to paint a grim picture of the Chinese distant-water fleet behaving badly in the seas off the coast of East Africa. They describe illegal shark-finning operations, with crew cutting the fins off dozens of sharks every night before throwing the still-living bodies overboard; captains ordering crew to kill dolphins and false killer whales (Pseudorca crassidens) so they can collect their teeth and jaws; North Korean workers kept on vessels



noticeable. However, he said the EJF report is shifting his view.

"This new report has provided more evidence of Chinese activities on our

Mongabay in an interview. "Those who think like I did before that China

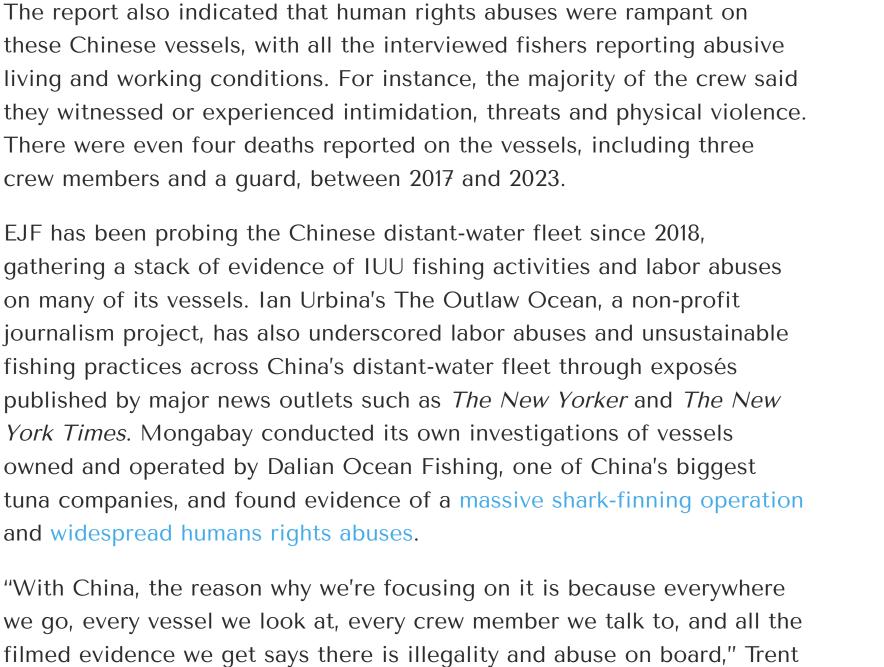
is like any other big country fishing all over, this report is beginning to

ocean, and a lot of this is not looking good, essentially," Sumaila told

EJF focused its investigation on Chinese distant-water vessels operating in the national waters of Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles and Tanzania, as well as areas beyond national jurisdiction in the Southwest Indian Ocean. The authors interviewed 44 fishers working on 27 Chinese tuna longliners operating in this part of the ocean, and also used satellite data, public data sets, and media and NGO reports. Eighty percent of interviewed fishers reported shark finning on their

'It's been going on now for years'

Crew members of the Chinese longline vessel 'Jing Lu Yuan No005' are seen hurriedly stuffing dried shark fins into bags. Image © Alex Hofford / Greenpeace.



Four sleeping crew members of the docked Chinese longliner Fu Yuan Yu 052 in 2006. Image © Greenpeace / Alex Hofford. Trent said he believes these issues are "systemic," with the Chinese distant-water fleet behaving in similar ways in "every geography and jurisdiction." "It's not an individual rogue operation in a particular place and time

port, and also helped build a fish-processing factory and ice plant,

according to Cliff Mboya, a researcher at the University of Johannesburg.

Then, in 2018, Mboya said, it came to light that fishing rights were given

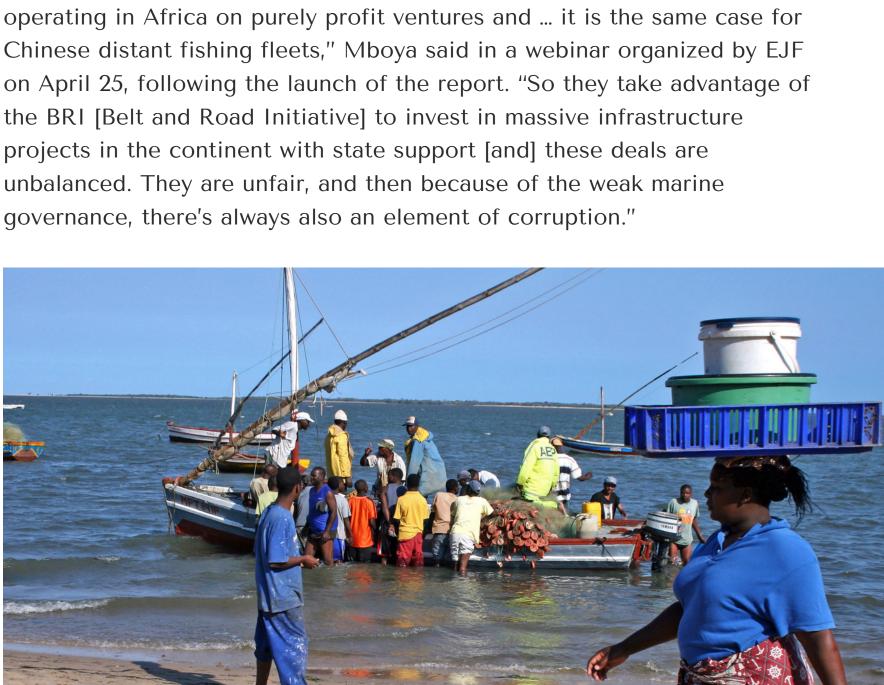
to 100 Chinese vessels — a deal that Mozambique's fisheries minister

infrastructure isn't being used to its full capacity, and the country has

"It becomes clear that Chinese SOEs [state-owned enterprises] are

said he was unaware of. Moreover, Mozambique's newly built

since been struggling to repay its debts to China.



A local fishing community in Mozambique in 2010. Image by Talea Miller, PBS NewsHour via Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0).

Philip Chou, senior director of global policy at Oceana, a Washington,

or writing of the report, but did provide comments to EJF before its

I think there was good reason to do so," Chou told Mongabay in an

"But I think there are other activities from other distant-water fishing

countries that should be looked into as well," he added. "And then you

could get a better sense of what China's role is in that ocean compared

publication, praised the report for its thorough investigation.

D.C.-based ocean conservation NGO, who wasn't involved in the research

"I think it's great that EJF looked into what's going on in China's fleet and

which were often flagged to smaller coastal states like the Seychelles, captured the "lion's share" of the Indian Ocean's yellowfin tuna stock, contributing to the near-collapse of the species.

A French purse seiner vessel sets its net on skipjack and yellowfin tuna associated with a fish aggregating device (FAD) in the Mozambique Channel in 2013. Image © Jiri Rezac / Greenpeace.

Trent of EJF said he believes the keys to positive change are increased

transparency, stronger regulation, and enforcement. These are some of

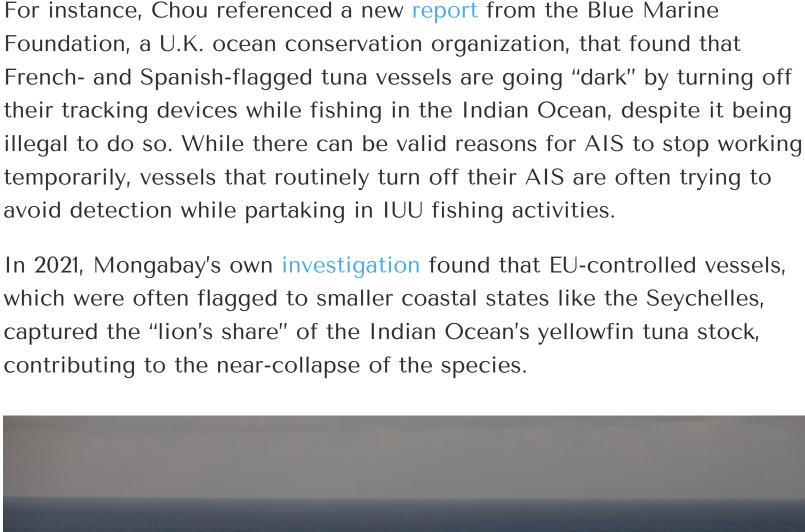
civil society organizations of which EJF and Oceana are members.

the tenets of the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency, a global network of

of the existing rules and obligations by IOTC members. "It is a big win," Trent said, "that this crucial work evidencing illegal fishing has not been blocked." Banner image: An artisanal fishing boat on a Mozambique beach. Image by Tom Leighton via Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Elizabeth Claire Alberts is a senior staff writer for Mongabay's Ocean

of the Compliance Committee, a group that discusses the implementation

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Is it just the Chinese fleet?

The report also recommends greater scrutiny and regulatory measures for states and entities connected with the Chinese distant-water fleet, including states that act as local flags for Chinese vessels; states in whose waters Chinese vessels operate; ports used by Chinese vessels; market states supplied by the Chinese distant-water fleet; and even the Chinese government itself. The report also makes specific recommendations for the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), the intergovernmental organization that regulates and manages tuna stocks in the Indian Ocean, such as increasing observer coverage on longliners to deter IUU fishing, banning transshipments — the transfer of catch between vessels at sea — that enable overfishing, and enacting measures to protect sharks and other aquatic animals. However, at the recent meeting of the IOTC that took place in Thailand from May 13-17, little progress was made toward these goals. Delegates

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thing, it's the largest in the world, with at least 2,500 vessels — but likely Ecuador and Argentina, where the Chinese distant-water fleet has drawn attention and stirred controversy. However, a recent report by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), a U.K.-based nonprofit

indefinitely, unable to go home even after completing multiyear contracts; and sick crew members forced to work until they collapse and die.

Mongabay made numerous attempts to contact several representatives of China's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA), the department responsible for fisheries, but did not receive any responses by the time of publication. However, in a white paper published in 2020, MARA states in Mandarin that it takes a "zero-tolerance" approach to illegal fishing activities by its distant-water fleet and that vessels violating this policy could face fines, the suspension or cancellation of their license, or other "severe punishments."

disabuse that."

vessels, and 60% reported the deliberate capture and injury of megafauna like whales, dolphins and turtles.

said. "And the Chinese have been pushing quite a robust argument that this isn't true, it's not correct, that they're dealing with it, that they've dealt with this and such. And that is just patently not true."

— it's been going on now for years," Trent said. "And I think ... it is almost inconceivable that the Chinese state and the relevant authorities do not know this is going on." The report also delves into China's foreign investment in the Southwest Indian Ocean region as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, which has resulted in the building of roads, public buildings, ports and other fishing infrastructure in countries like Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Tanzania and Mozambique. It says that while these investments are "couched in terms of win-win, sustainable development and collective benefits from the blue economy," the reality is different. For instance, when a cyclone damaged a fishing port in Beira, Mozambique, in 2000, China invested \$120 million to reconstruct the

interview.

to those other countries."

'It is a big win'

also failed to reach an agreement to limit the catches of yellowfin tuna, which has been overfished for years, due in part to China's distant-water fleet. But there was one positive move at the IOTC, according to Trent, who didn't attend the meeting but followed the proceedings remotely. He said China introduced a proposal that would have made it difficult for third parties, including environmental groups, to submit any evidence of "vessels' noncompliance" to rules and regulations. But parties struck down China's proposal, and instead adopted another that directed those who wanted to provide evidence of noncompliance to attend the meeting

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