

# The dark business of Chinese fishing in Argentine waters



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**Argentina has one of the richest exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the world. Due to the abundance of resources and the lack of controls, it now faces a significant threat: the massive presence of the Chinese fishing fleet. These ships operate at the limits of the law, although they often cross it, putting the local economy and the fragile balance of its marine ecosystem at risk.**

The Argentine EEZ is a marine treasure, known especially for its abundance of squid (*Illex argentinus*), a key resource for the fishing industry. This wealth has attracted multiple foreign fleets, with the Chinese fleet being the most aggressive. With hundreds of vessels operating in the vicinity, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing has become a constant concern.

Between 350 and 500 Chinese vessels operate in the region, causing economic losses estimated at between \$1 and \$2 billion annually for Argentina. In addition, according to the government, since 2010, the Argentine Navy has expelled 11 Chinese vessels from national waters for suspected illegal fishing.

According to research by Outlaw Ocean, China has consolidated its dominance in global fishing by deploying a fleet of more than 6,000 vessels, far outnumbering any other nation and three times that of its nearest competitor.

## The incursion of Chinese ships into Argentine waters

But for several years now, the Chinese fleet has not only been fishing in international waters or illegally entering the exclusive economic zones of various countries, including Argentina. It also uses various tactics to access Argentine waters and fish "legally." According to Milko Schwartzman, a marine conservation specialist, "China requests, through companies based in Argentina, permits to enter new vessels into certain fisheries or directly buys permits from local companies."

Although these ships operate under the Argentine flag, they are owned by Chinese capital, creating unfair competition. Schwartzman warns that the superficial legality of these operations hides questionable practices, such as the control of the vessels by Chinese crews once they leave port, something prohibited by national law. This not only violates Argentine legislation, but also calls into question the country's sovereignty over its own waters.

Estimates indicate that Chinese companies control at least 62 industrial fishing vessels flying the Argentine flag.

## Impact on communities and the ecosystem

China has at least 250 "flagships" in the territorial waters of various countries. Overfishing by these fleets, along with the use of prohibited fishing gear and the exploitation of quasi-slave labor, has significantly reduced the catches of national fleets, affecting the economy of coastal regions.

In this regard, Schwartzman explained that "illegal fishing has a very significant negative impact on local fishing by contributing to the overexploitation of fishing resources, using prohibited gear, and operating without respecting the seasons or the closed species. This deteriorates the health of the fishing ground, affecting all those who depend on it and harming local businesses."

The specialist also said that unregulated fishing outside Argentina's exclusive economic zone faces unfair competition in international markets. "There are fleets from different countries that are subsidized by their governments, operate with semi-slave labor and do not comply with safety, environmental or health regulations. These advantages create a hidden subsidy that allows them to offer artificially low prices, forcing fleets from coastal countries, which comply with regulations and pay taxes, to compete at a disadvantage."

Although the Argentine government has granted permits in previous administrations, the current authorities have the responsibility of supervising and regulating these activities. Schwartzman stresses that "the government should review how permits have been granted and how these companies act, not only the Chinese ones, but all those that operate in our country."

## Lack of transparency

The case of the Chinese vessel Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10, captured in 2016 by the Argentine Naval Prefecture for fishing illegally within the EEZ, is emblematic. However, similar cases have not always resulted in effective sanctions, and the lack of transparency in the management of these incidents has generated distrust in the State's capacity to protect marine resources.

"It is crucial to improve transparency in all aspects related to marine fishing in Argentina," Schwartzman insists. Opacity in management not only makes it difficult to protect resources, but also limits citizens' access to vital information on how marine resources, which are the heritage of all Argentines, are being exploited.

"Argentina has not handled diplomatic relations with China very well in relation to illegal fishing. In many cases, it has not made diplomatic protests or taken a firm position regarding this problem," the specialist stressed.

He added: "We also know that the Foreign Ministry and other government agencies have signed agreements with China on the conservation of marine resources, which is somewhat ironic. While China is engaged in illegal fishing, Argentina is signing secret agreements with China. No one has seen them. This shows very poor management, behind the back of society. Obviously we assume that all these agreements benefit China."

## Is anything being done to solve the problem?

Although Argentina has implemented several measures to combat illegal fishing, none of them are effective. To stop the Chinese advance, sea patrols have been intensified and fines have been increased. In 2021, the Navy and the Prefecture began working together to improve control in the Argentine sea. However – Schwartzman warns – "these measures focus mainly on the use of force and security, while diplomatic and management actions outside the exclusive economic zone are insufficient. Overfishing in international waters directly affects resources within Argentina's exclusive economic zone."

At a global level, there are some agreements in the works that could improve the management of marine resources. One of them is the UN agreement on marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction, approved in 2023, which still needs 60 ratifications to enter into force and has barely reached less than 10. This agreement seeks to regulate the exploitation of resources on the high seas.

"Another important agreement is the one banning subsidies for illegal fishing, approved in 2022, which also requires a minimum number of ratifications to be effective," explained Milko Schwartzman.

"Furthermore," he continued, "the need for a regional agreement to conserve marine resources in the South Atlantic has been highlighted. It would be beneficial for Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay to work on a joint initiative to protect biodiversity in the South Atlantic, outside the 200 miles of their exclusive economic zone."

## Environmental impact

Overfishing by the Chinese fleet also has a worrying environmental impact. The intensive exploitation of squid and other species not only threatens the sustainability of fishing, but also disrupts the marine food chain, putting the balance of the ecosystem in the South Atlantic at risk.

The presence of the Chinese fishing fleet in Argentine waters is a complex challenge that transcends the legality of operations. It involves questions of sovereignty, unfair competition, impacts on the local economy and the ecosystem, and a transparency deficit that must be urgently addressed. As Schwartzman points out, it is essential to take measures to regulate and supervise these activities, to protect marine resources, and to ensure transparency in the exploitation of resources.

"The lack of transparency is what affects all the fishing problems in Argentina. We need to greatly improve transparency in all aspects related to marine fishing in Argentina. Because marine resources belong to all Argentines and we have the right to know what is being fished, how much, how, who and how decisions are made, and that is failing, it has always failed, and the most important thing is to improve transparency," concluded the specialist. **(NO BLUE, NO GREEN) #OURSEA**

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