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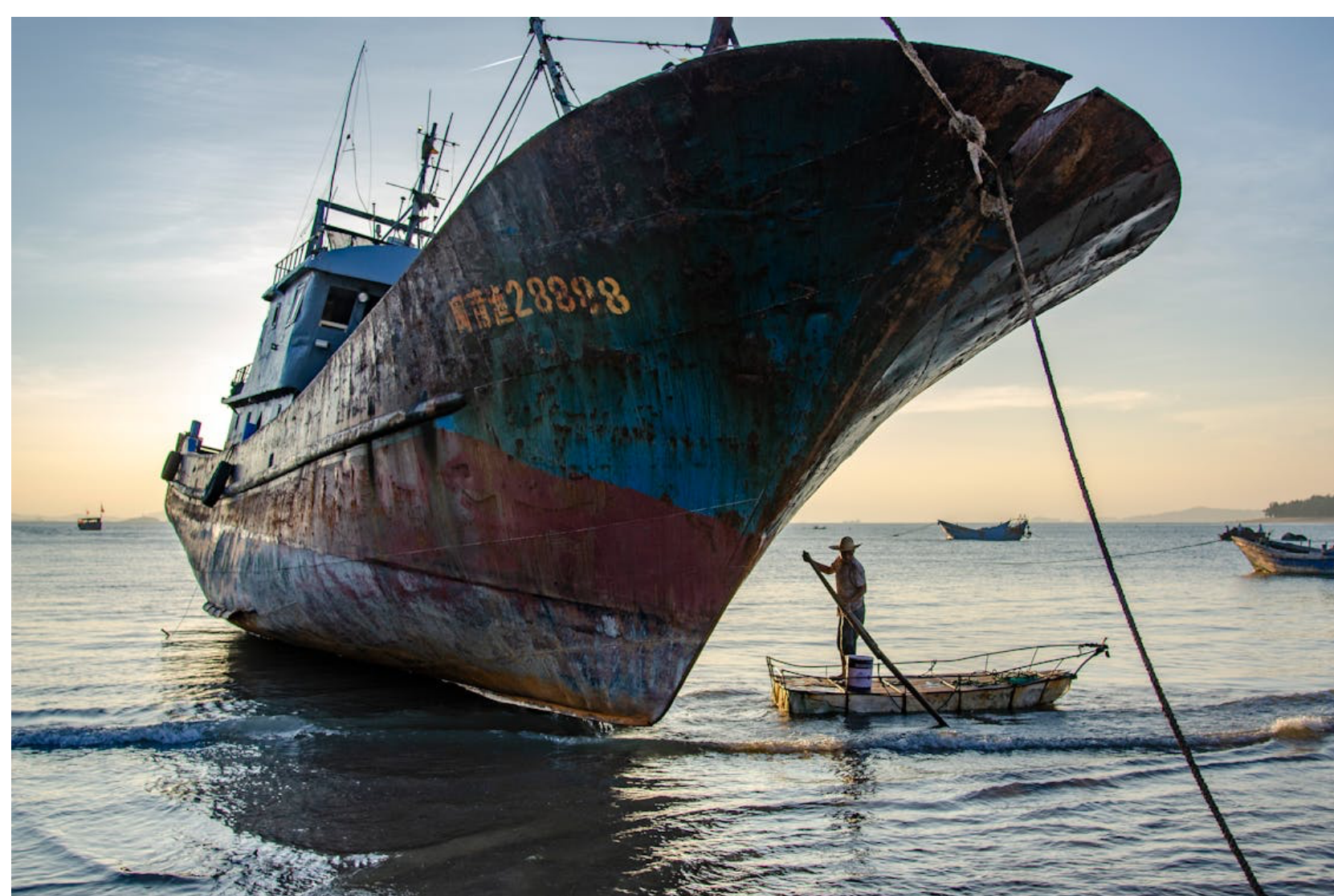
Ocean Security and Sustainable Fisheries Project

It's High Time to Get Serious About Organized Crime on the High Seas

A call for global coordination to end illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing on the high seas

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Energy, Water & Oceans

June 6, 2024



As we celebrate global ocean conservation milestones on World Ocean Day this year, we are ever mindful of the work left to do. A concerted global effort to end IUU fishing is needed – with leadership and collaboration from fishing nations, non-governmental partners, and multilateral institutions.

Thanks to modern technology and artificial intelligence, our vast planet – 70 percent of which is ocean – is getting smaller by the minute. Our ability to monitor human impacts on the ocean, and to better protect and manage its vast resources, has grown exponentially in the past decade. And yet, we don't apply that capacity. Even as our 21st-century capabilities can give us the vital information we need to do this work, our legal and political tools are badly out of date. "Areas beyond national jurisdiction" remain a place where outlaws and organized criminal networks can thrive.

The high seas are one of the most dangerous places on Earth – and there is no law or court that can mete out justice if a stateless fishing vessel is involved in horrible crimes, including murder. Ian Urbina, a renowned journalist, has been telling this story for years. His book and related project, entitled [Outlaw Ocean](#), has documented the vast amount of criminal activity that happens at sea with no place for victims or their families to turn for accountability. As [Ian put it](#), the high seas are "too big to police, and under no clear international authority, these immense regions of treacherous water play host to rampant criminality and exploitation."

One of the most pervasive types of criminal activity is illegal fishing, including the [sometimes inhumane treatment of crews](#) on scofflaw fishing vessels. It is estimated that [one in five fish](#) worldwide is caught through IUU fishing, valued at least \$36 billion. This is a conservative estimate; in today's marketplace, these costs may be much higher. Illegal fishing has been [called by security experts](#) a "global scourge" and one of the biggest threats to the sustainability of the ocean. [It is devastating](#) to ocean ecosystems, it depletes global fishing stocks putting the world's food security at risk, and it undermines many fragile coastal economies and communities all over the world.

Make no mistake, industrial fishing vessels that work the distant waters outside of national jurisdictions, because of the [lack of transparency in the sector and weak legal and enforcement environment](#), are the mode of convenience for [many other crimes](#) – including human trafficking, forced labor, smuggling of illegal narcotics and guns, and piracy. The recent case of the *Adriana*, a rusty fishing trawler that sank last June off the coast of Greece, killing hundreds of migrants on board, is illustrative. National coast guards allegedly just watched the struggling vessel – which had engine trouble and no food or water – but claimed they were [powerless to act](#) because the ship was in international waters. And late last month a [Greek court dismissed](#) the legal case against the vessel's crew for the same reason – the ship's location in an area beyond the jurisdiction of its national courts.

There are bright spots. Artificial intelligence and satellite and other remote sensing technologies abound, which can provide information about all the potential illegal activity associated with industrial fishing vessels in real-time. And they are beginning to be used at scale. President Biden put IUU fishing on the global security radar of the U.S. by issuing a [National Security Memorandum orchestrating](#) a whole-of-government approach to tackling IUU fishing. The United States and some other countries have stepped up their activities to improve maritime domain awareness and encourage sharing more information to help those countries who are losing the most to illegal fishing, [such as the Pacific Islands nations](#). The U.S. Coast Guard is [working closely](#) with an international non-profit organization called [Global Fishing Watch](#), to try to advance greater ocean governance through transparency. And organizations like the Stimson Center are supporting these efforts by acting as the secretariat for the [IUU Fishing Action Alliance](#), a group of countries (including the United States) and organizations who have pledged to work together to combat IUU fishing.

The scope and scale of illegal fishing is becoming clearer and clearer. The ocean is in serious trouble – more than [30 percent of global fish stocks are overfished](#), there are countless illegal fishing vessels, with forced labor on more than we know, not to mention human trafficking, drug smuggling, gunrunning, and piracy. In addition to the food, economic, and environmental security threats to developing coastal nations, the opacity of the global seafood supply chain means that U.S. consumers are too often [in the dark](#) about where the fish they're purchasing is caught, who owns the fishing vessels, and what labor abuses on vessels and in processing plants could be occurring.

And yet, there is still no concerted global effort to bring justice to bear. We are watching the ocean being plundered, with many innocent people paying the price. We still have not come together in a concerted way to make a lasting change. It's not enough to raise general awareness of these crimes. Indeed, the fact that we know it is happening makes our inaction even more tragic. We must redouble our efforts now. We have the tools. We have the capacity to put a serious dent in high crime happening on fishing vessels in the areas beyond national jurisdiction. What we need now is coordinated action. With serious global cooperation and leadership – by the most prolific fishing nations of the world such as the U.S., Europe, and China, and multilateral organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization – we can bring law and order to the high seas.

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