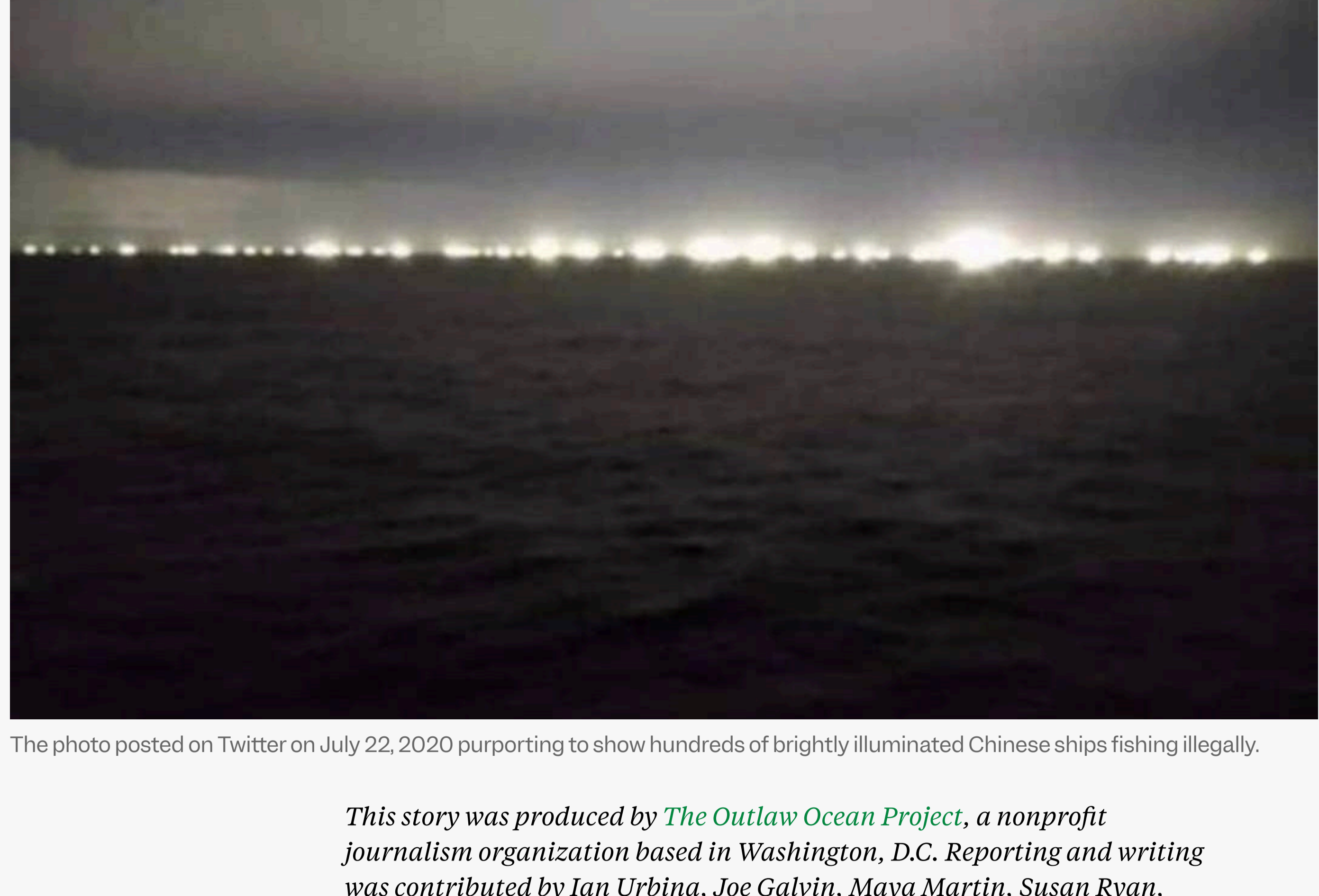


Politics

## A Frequent Culprit, China Is Also an Easy Scapegoat

China's fishing fleet engages in illegal practices and uses captive labor, but it has also sometimes been an easy target for politically motivated and inaccurate criticism, largely from the West.

By Ian Urbina  
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The photo posted on Twitter on July 22, 2020 purporting to show hundreds of brightly illuminated Chinese ships fishing illegally.

*This story was produced by [The Outlaw Ocean Project](#), a nonprofit journalism organization based in Washington, D.C. Reporting and writing was contributed by Ian Urbina, Joe Galvin, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan, Daniel Murphy and Austin Brush. It is being published as part of an international collaboration between news outlets. The reporting was partially funded by the Pulitzer Center.*

TUMBES, Peru – On July 22, 2020, a journalist based in Santa Cruz, Ecuador, posted a photo on Twitter that purported to show hundreds of brightly illuminated Chinese ships fishing illegally near the Galapagos islands in a protected area.

“Massive presence of the fishing fleet #China” at the edge of the islands, the tweet warned, “a true floating city that captures everything in its nets.”

A media avalanche followed. Dozens of news organizations ran articles announcing the arrival of the Chinese armada and warning of the threat it posed to biodiversity in Darwin’s paradise. “Alarm over discovery of hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels near Galápagos Islands,” read a headline in *The Guardian*, citing the risks to “one of the world’s greatest concentrations of shark species.

One of the largest newspapers in Ecuador, *El Universo*, ran a story describing the ships as a “stealthy fleet,” which it said was inadvertently catching and killing marine life such as rays, turtles and sea lions. The Ecuadorian president at the time, Lenin Moreno, filed a protest to Beijing and vowed on social media to defend his country’s national waters.

But the tweet was inaccurate. There was no “discovery.” The Chinese fleet had been openly visiting the area annually for roughly a decade, and the photo in fact showed it fishing in Argentinian waters, not near the Galapagos. Not only that, most of the ships were squid-fishing vessels called jiggers, which do not use nets and do not typically catch sharks, unintentionally or otherwise, because their lines are not strong enough.

Roughly 13 hours after the original post, the reporter who published the Galapagos tweet issued a correction. The original tweet continued to circulate, however, and in the next week it was retweeted over 2,500 times. The correction, for its part, was retweeted fewer than 60 times. The photo with the faulty caption attracted more than 10,000 likes on Facebook and was also shared on Reddit.

It wasn’t unreasonable to suspect the Chinese fleet of illegal behavior. China has a well-documented reputation for violating international fishing laws and standards, bullying other ships, intruding on the maritime territory of other countries and abusing its fishing workers. In 2021, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, a nonprofit research group, ranked China as the world’s biggest purveyor of illegal fishing.

But even a country that regularly flouts norms and breaks the law can also at times become a victim of misinformation. This is what seems to have happened in the case of the Galapagos tweet. “The larger issue here,” said Daniel Pauly, a marine biologist at the University of British Columbia, “is scapegoating.”

Such scapegoating creates problems, Pauly continued. When China feels that its fishing practices are being unfairly portrayed, he said, it becomes reluctant to engage with the international community on ocean issues. And China often pushes back by accusing its accusers of hypocrisy. And sometimes they’re right.

Nonetheless, a [recent global investigation published in The New Yorker](#) has intensified the criticism light on China’s distant-water fishing fleet, quite especially its tendency toward labor abuses on many of its ships and in its processing plants. The investigation found a broad pattern of human rights and labor abuses, including debt bondage, wage withholding, excessive working hours, beatings of deckhands, passport confiscation, prohibiting timely access to medical care and deaths from violence.

More than 100 Chinese squid ships were found to have fished illegally, including by targeting protected species, operating without a license and dumping excess fish into the sea. Forced labor from China’s Xinjiang province is being used extensively in the country’s seafood industry.

The Chinese government has forcefully transferred more than a thousand ethnic minorities over 2,000 miles across the country to work in Shandong province, China’s most important fishing and seafood processing hub, in factories that supply hundreds of restaurants, grocers and food-service companies in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere.

Products tied to workers from Xinjiang province are banned from import into the U.S., and the investigation has triggered international outcry because much of the seafood that is consumed in Europe and the U.S. is caught by Chinese ships or processed in the country’s plants.

Before the investigation published in *The New Yorker*, much of the criticism of China’s fishing fleet focused on environmental concerns. Over a third of fish stocks globally have been overfished, and Chris Costello, a professor of natural resource economics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said that the West needs to be careful to take a historical outlook on the issue. He added that long before China emerged as the dominant fishing power, other countries, including in the West, fished unsustainably. “In other words,” he said, “overfishing is not a China problem.”

Rising ocean temperatures and increasing acidification driven by climate change have already degraded 60 percent of the world’s marine ecosystems, and the [latest United Nations estimates](#) are that more than half of all marine species may be close to extinction by 2100. These changing ocean conditions are pushing fish species into new and different waters, stoking more conflict on the high seas and in regional waters, and China, with its globally dominant fishing fleet, has increasingly become a target of criticism as countries vie for the ocean’s dwindling and shifting marine resources.

In response to claims of illegal fishing in the Chinese fleet in March 2023, Wang Wenbin, a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry, said: “We call on the U.S. to do its own part on the issue of distant-water fisheries first, rather than act as a judge or police to criticize other countries’ normal fishing activities.”

In the six weeks after the Galapagos tweet, more than 27 news outlets ran similar stories about the threat posed to sharks and other marine wildlife by the Chinese ships. “Reports of 300+ Chinese vessels near the Galapagos disabling tracking systems, changing ship names, and leaving marine debris are deeply troubling,” Mike Pompeo, then the U.S. Secretary of State, tweeted on August 27, 2020. “We again call on the [Peoples’ Republic of China] to be transparent and enforce its own zero tolerance policy on illegal fishing.”

Some in the intelligence community, aware of how Pompeo was using misinformation to scapegoat the Chinese, grumbled when the tweet went out. But they understood the forces at play. “Sometimes,” one intelligence analyst said, “politics prevail.”

Outside the U.S. and E.U., other countries also capitalize on the fears tied to China, said Jonathan R. Green, the founder of the Galapagos Whale Shark Project. Within Peru and Ecuador, political parties play the Chinese off the U.S. for leverage. These parties often accuse each other of being too cozy with China or the U.S. In trade negotiations or development deals, for example, party officials within the Ecuadorian or Peruvian government sometimes cite the U.S. or China as a potential alternative partner that they can resort to if need be. Different fishing sectors in these countries also bend conservation or geopolitical concerns to their own advantage.

That may be one of the reasons that sharks played such a prominent role in the furor that followed the Galapagos tweet. The biggest culprits in the decline of shark numbers in Galapagos waters, Green explained, are not Chinese squid-fishing vessels but Ecuadorian and Peruvian tuna long-liners and local net-fished trawlers and purse seiners. These boats are far more numerous, he said, their gear is equipped to catch sharks, and in many cases local governments legally permit them to target the animals.

“There’s a good reason that the tuna fishermen in Peru and Ecuador are often the ones to stoke the headlines about the Chinese squid ships,” he said. “It’s diversionary.”

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Along the coast of Tumbes, Peru, outside a guard booth at a checkpoint in Puerto Pizarro, hundreds of shark fins were spread out on the concrete, drying in the sun.

Antonio Torres shook his head in disbelief at the sheer volume. Torres is responsible for inspecting the fins on behalf of the Peruvian Ministry of Production, the federal agency that polices the trafficking of protected wildlife. “There are like 300 sacks of shark fins,” he said, “and you know that in each bag there are about 200 sharks. It’s too much to be accidental.”

Sharks are a concern because three-quarters of their species are threatened globally with extinction. Ecuadorian waters around the Galapagos islands have the highest concentration of sharks in the world and are the only location where pregnant whale sharks are known to congregate. The islands, at the epicenter of El Nino and La Nina climatic extremes, are considered a [natural laboratory](#) for studying the impacts of climate change on sharks’ diets.

Trade and fishery data indicate that most of the shark fins passing through Tumbes come from Ecuador, which in 2007 changed its law to allow fishermen to land and sell fins or meat from sharks caught “incidentally” or by mistake, as “bycatch.” Fishermen can earn up to \$1,000 per kilogram for shark fins sold in East Asia.

After being landed in Ecuador, the fins are typically trucked across the border into Peru, which is among the world’s largest exporters of shark fins, and shipped mostly to Hong Kong and elsewhere in Asia for shark-fin soup. The scale of the trade is wildly underestimated, according to Jennifer Jacquet, an environmental-studies professor at New York University.

Between 1979 and 2004, she said, shark landings for the Ecuadorian mainland were an estimated 7,000 tons per year, or nearly half a million sharks, about 3.6 times greater than those that had previously been reported by the U.N. But the traffic is growing. In 2021, these exports were at a historic high, with 430 tons shipped, or the equivalent of more than 570,000 sharks killed.

Many of those sharks are caught by Ecuadorian ships in Ecuador’s waters. Since 2018, at least 136 Ecuadorian fishing ships have entered the Galapagos Islands’ reserve, which covers more than 51,000 square miles, according to the director of the archipelago’s national park. Many of these fishing captains rely on fish aggregating devices, more commonly called “fads,” which are special buoys built with plastic and bamboo flotsam strung together with old nets.

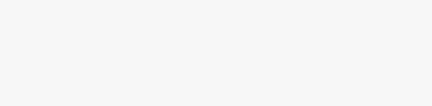
To attract species like tuna and blue marlin, fishing companies are increasingly using “smart” fads equipped with sonar and GPS, which let boat captains sit back and wait on land to be alerted when it’s time to gather up their haul. The fads are so effective that in some places in the world fishermen hire armed guards to sit on or near them to ensure that competitors don’t destroy them or steal the fish around them.

The purpose of fads is to attract fish to one spot, making them easier to catch and greatly reducing the time required to keep them at sea. Such concentrations of fish in turn attract sharks, making boats easier to catch too. Sometimes captains even attach goats’ heads onto the fads as an added lure for the sharks. Ecuadorian ships deploy more fads than those of any other country, according to a study in 2015 by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Not surprisingly, the countries catching so many sharks in the region have found it useful to divert the world’s attention to the threats that China’s fishing fleet poses to local populations of marine wildlife.

But in this case, according to Manolo Yopez, an Ecuadorian conservationist who used to work in the shark-fin trade, the truth is that the Chinese are not the problem. “We might sell the fins at sea, boat to boat, to the Chinese,” he said during a conversation in a fishing boat half a mile offshore from Santa Cruz. “But in these waters we’re the ones, not the Chinese, doing all the catching of sharks.”

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