

Will 2022 mark a turning point in the regulation or banning of bottom trawling?



Competition is fierce between small-scale fishers and trawlers off the West African coast.

(Garth Cripps/Bottom Trawling Coalition)

NEWS



By [Annick Berger](#)

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A growing number of voices are calling for an end to what has been described as 'the worst fishing technique in the world', bottom trawling. They are also calling for a profound transformation of this sector, even though around a quarter of the fish consumed in the world are caught using this method, which causes serious damage to the seabed.

To provide a solid foundation for regulating the practice, some 40 scientists, NGOs, academics and environmental consultants joined forces to produce a report, *[New perspectives on an old fishing practice: Scale, context and impacts of bottom trawling](https://www.fauna-flora.org/app/uploads/2021/12/FFI_2021_New-perspectives-on-an-old-fishing-practice.pdf)* (https://www.fauna-flora.org/app/uploads/2021/12/FFI_2021_New-perspectives-on-an-old-fishing-practice.pdf), published in December 2021.

The study comes at a time when the European Union is developing its Action Plan to Conserve Fisheries Resources and Protect Marine Ecosystems and the United Nations has declared 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture.

Bottom trawling yields estimated catches of 30 million tonnes a year. This figure has been declining since 1989, except in Asia, which accounts for almost 50 per cent of the world's legal catch each year.

"Unlike other fishing practices, it's very diverse in terms of what we use it for," Daniel Steadman, one of the report authors and former fisheries and biodiversity technical specialist at the environmental NGO Fauna & Flora International, tells *Equal Times*. "We use it for high value species, such as cod or plaice, and for relatively low value species that we still eat, such as shrimp. We also use it for very low value species that are processed to feed farm animals."

Whilst it is known that [trawling harms the seabed \(https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-04-14/bottom-trawling-hurts-the-ocean-and-the-climate\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-04-14/bottom-trawling-hurts-the-ocean-and-the-climate), that it does not target the species it catches and is a major consumer of fuel, scientists are also now warning about its impact on the climate. "Recent studies show that bottom trawling [releases carbon into the atmosphere \(https://www.equaltimes.org/what-kind-of-ships-and-fuel-is-the#.Yjy4pufP02x\)](https://www.equaltimes.org/what-kind-of-ships-and-fuel-is-the#.Yjy4pufP02x) and the oceans," Steve Trent, CEO of the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), tells *Equal Times*.

The 'triple bottom line' of bottom trawling

Several reports published by NGOs such as Oceana have [already shown \(https://oceana.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/Trawling_BZ_10may10_toAudrey.pdf\)](https://oceana.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/Trawling_BZ_10may10_toAudrey.pdf) the effects of this practice on the populations of the countries where it is most widespread. Accordingly, the document published in December reaffirms that the environmental and social issues are closely linked and must be addressed in tandem to find a sustainable solution.

"When scientists think about the damage, they think about it in three ways, the so-called triple bottom line: the environmental damage and the social damage offset by the economic benefit," Dr. Steve Rocliffe, senior technical advisor at Blue Ventures, tells *Equal Times*.

And the social impact is worrying, especially when long-distance fleets operate, legally or [illegally \(https://africacenter.org/publication/criminality-africa-fishing-industry-threat-human-security/\)](https://africacenter.org/publication/criminality-africa-fishing-industry-threat-human-security/), in waters other than their own, as bottom trawling is often carried out less than 12 miles from the shore, where boats make 20 per cent of their catches, [putting the industry's heavyweights in direct competition with small-scale fishers \(https://www.equaltimes.org/madagascar-fisheries-ravaged-by#.Yjy5CufP02x\)](https://www.equaltimes.org/madagascar-fisheries-ravaged-by#.Yjy5CufP02x) whose survival often depends on the resources caught at sea. This is particularly evident off the coast of Africa, which is the [number one victim \(https://qz.com/africa/2092998/who-](https://qz.com/africa/2092998/who-)

[benefits-from-africas-24-billion-marine-fisheries-industry/](#)) of bottom trawling: over 90 per cent of legal catches are made in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of 34 countries by foreign vessels, particularly those from China or Vietnam, but also from countries such as Morocco, the United States or Argentina.

These fishing giants wreak havoc on the areas where they operate. The taxes paid to the countries that own the waters where they fish are often negligible.

According to 2019 data published in West Africa's Coastal Bottom Trawl Fishery (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X1830335X>) report, agreements allowing foreign operators to come and fish in West African waters only generated revenues of between 2 per cent and 8 per cent of the estimated value of the fish and crustaceans when landed.

"Bottom trawling has a huge social cost," Daniel Pauly, the specialist behind the [Sea Around Us](http://www.searoundus.org/) (<https://www.searoundus.org/>) programme at the University of British Columbia, in Canada, tells *Equal Times*. "Only the Senegalese should be allowed to fish in Senegalese waters, not Spaniards, Russians or Chinese."

This unequivocal stance is not shared by everyone. Although the cost to small-scale fishers is incontestable – 100 million people (<https://transformbottomtrawling.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Transform-Bottom-Trawling-CTA-Referenced.pdf>) rely on inshore subsistence and small-scale artisanal fishing for their daily food and livelihood – an abrupt halt to bottom trawling without careful analysis could, in the short term, generate a degree of global food insecurity by depriving farmers of very affordable fishmeal to feed their livestock and depriving the poor of a cheap and widely available source of nutrition. "It's an ongoing debate," says Roccliffe. "But clearly, in the long run, if you destroy fisheries you make food insecurity worse."

Inshore exclusion zones

The economic stakes are partly to blame for the lack of progress in regulating the practice. In a bid to find solutions, the [Transform Bottom Trawling Coalition](https://transformbottomtrawling.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Transform-Bottom-Trawling-CTA-Referenced.pdf) (<https://transformbottomtrawling.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Transform-Bottom-Trawling-CTA-Referenced.pdf>), which brings together small-scale fishers, seafood companies, environmentalists and scientists, has launched a four point call to action to try to limit the environmental and social impacts of bottom trawling.

The coalition is calling on all coastal states to establish, expand and strengthen inshore exclusion zones (IEZs), where all bottom trawling is banned and only small-scale fishers have exclusive access. "Conflicts emerge when bottom trawlers and small-scale fishers operate in the same area," says Tom

Collinson of the Transform Bottom Trawling Coalition.

Testimonies collected in [Liberia \(https://transformbottomtrawling.org/asset/people-say-the-trawlers/\)](https://transformbottomtrawling.org/asset/people-say-the-trawlers/) and [Senegal \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSpVyZVChFc\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSpVyZVChFc) illustrate the problems that can arise between small-scale fishers and large trawlers, such as collisions.

An estimated 250 small-scale fishers are killed in collisions with trawlers in West Africa every year, a number that may, moreover, be grossly underestimated.

Solutions are already being explored in various countries to strengthen IEZs, such as in Guinea Bissau, where the exclusion zone has been extended to 12 miles from the coast, and in Liberia, which already banned trawlers from operating within three miles of its coast in 2010.

The Transform Bottom Trawling Coalition is also calling on international bodies to ban all bottom trawling in [marine protected areas \(https://seas-at-risk.org/multimedia/ban-bottom-trawling-in-marine-protected-areas/#:~:text=Bottom%2Dtrawling%20is%20one%20of,Areas%20in%20Europe%2C%20are%20impacted.\)](https://seas-at-risk.org/multimedia/ban-bottom-trawling-in-marine-protected-areas/#:~:text=Bottom%2Dtrawling%20is%20one%20of,Areas%20in%20Europe%2C%20are%20impacted.) (which are not protected against bottom trawling) and to expand their size.

Its third demand is for an end to subsidies for bottom trawling and the redeployment of this money to support the transition to low impact fishing methods. The industry's survival is largely dependent on state subsidies in the form of fuel tax exemptions and motorization subsidies. The United Nations has been officially [calling for a ban on these subsidies since 2015 \(https://www.un.org/en/desa/ocean-conference-un-agencies-commit-cutting-harmful-fishing-subsidies\)](https://www.un.org/en/desa/ocean-conference-un-agencies-commit-cutting-harmful-fishing-subsidies), as the practice encourages overfishing, IUU (illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing (<https://www.equaltimes.org/can-the-world-unite-to-combat#.Yjy7MufP02x>) and associated abuses such as [forced labour \(https://www.equaltimes.org/saving-workers-from-the-hell-of#.Yjy7UufP02x\)](https://www.equaltimes.org/saving-workers-from-the-hell-of#.Yjy7UufP02x) "If you take away the money, you take away the problem," says Rocliffe, as it would prevent, for example, a French boat from fishing off Liberia, given that the practice would no longer be profitable. Finally, the coalition is also calling for a freeze on permits for all new, untrawled areas.

The Transform Bottom Trawling Coalition is urging "all coastal states to tackle bottom trawling by 2030 and to implement these four demands," says Collinson. "We recognise that ending bottom trawling is extremely complex and nuanced. We are not therefore calling for an immediate ban on bottom trawling, but for a fair transition to low impact methods."

Time for action

"If we want a real transformation and transition of this sector, in the long term, we have to make sure it is fair," says Steadman. "We need to consider not only the rights of the people who are affected by the practice, but also the rights of the people who work in the industry. That's why we're comparing this

transition with the fossil fuel transition, the economic shift is the same.”

These suggested solutions and lines of thought could be taken up by world leaders this year, at the [UN Ocean Conference \(https://www.un.org/en/conferences/ocean2022\)](https://www.un.org/en/conferences/ocean2022), for example, to be held in Portugal in June 2022. But for now, beyond the lofty statements, no concrete measures have yet been taken. “We need to see action taken at government level,” says Collinson.

“The destruction of the seabed and the impacts on small-scale fishers are not limited to remote, resource poor countries in West Africa, they are also affecting fisheries in European countries and the US. We need to see a global and coherent policy to achieve real change in bottom trawling.”

Not everyone is convinced by this approach, and many NGOs and scientists are still campaigning for a total ban on bottom trawling. “It is impossible to improve this practice,” says Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia. Trent of the EFJ agrees. “Low-cost fish are actually the most expensive, because they lead to the destruction of fishing grounds,” he argues. “If we continue like this, we will not be able to feed the growing number of people on our planet, we will not be able to maintain the integrity of our ocean ecosystems.” Pauly concludes: “If bottom trawling were introduced today, it would never be allowed. The only reason it is tolerated is because it was introduced 200 years ago.”

This article has been translated from French.

Suggested reading



Madagascar fisheries ravaged by foreign plunder

[\(madagascar-fisheries-ravaged-by\)](#)