

Mongabay Series: Indonesian Fisheries

With drop in illegal fishing comes rise in piracy, study in Indonesia finds

by Basten Gokkon on 22 February 2024



- *Indonesia's crackdown on illegal fishing is driving an increase in maritime piracy, a new study shows.*
- *In recent years, the*

government has taken harsh measures against illegal fishers, including banning foreign fishing vessels from its waters, and blowing up those it seizes.

- *However, researchers say the crackdown's success, without addressing the drivers of illegal fishing, including poverty, "can inadvertently shift effort from fishing to piracy."*
- *Illegal fishing costs an estimated \$3 billion in lost revenue for Indonesia, the world's second-biggest producer of wild-caught seafood.*

JAKARTA — The Indonesian government's efforts to tackle illegal fishing in its vast waters have had the unintended consequence of driving an increase in maritime piracy, according to a new study.

The decades-long campaign against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is aimed at cracking down on activities that cost the country billions of dollars in losses annually. However, these measures — ranging from establishing fishing quotas for local and foreign vessels, to limiting destructive gear — appear to have boosted pirate attacks, particularly in waters with high vessel traffic like the Malacca Strait, according to the study

Conversation

published

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0962629824000180?via%3Dihub>) Feb. 3 by researchers from Indonesia, Canada and the U.S.

"If you take a unilateral approach and don't deal with the root causes of these issues, such as food insecurity, poverty, and joblessness, government efforts to counter the illicit harvesting of marine resources at the local level can inadvertently shift effort from fishing to piracy," said study co-author Maria Lourdes D. Palomares, project manager of the Sea Around Us, a research initiative at the University of British Columbia.

"To our knowledge, this is the first study to establish a negative association between maritime piracy incidents at the local level and illegal fishing. At least in Indonesia, the two practices are substitutive," she said in a statement (<https://www.seaaroundus.org/unilateral-efforts-combat-illegal-fishing-may-spur-piracy-certain-regions/>).



One of Indonesia's high-profile measures against illegal fishing has been to seize suspect vessels and blow them up at sea. Image courtesy of the Indonesian Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries.

The researchers looked at data related to IUU and piracy based on time and location as well as information on illegal catches in Indonesia from 1990 to 2017. They also analyzed satellite imagery to come up with a statistical model that showed that a decrease in illegal fishing and nearby vessel traffic independently increased the potential for piracy events in a given area.

Indonesia is the world's largest archipelago and is the second-largest producer of wild-caught seafood, after China. But 20-38% of the country's wild seafood exports in 2011 had reportedly been caught illegally (<http://www.searoundus.org/illegal->

foreign-fishing-and-lack-of-reporting-threaten-sierra-leones-fisheries-sector/) by local fishers and vessels recruited by transnational criminal organizations.

Illegal fishing activities are estimated to cost the country at least \$3 billion annually in lost revenue.

Indonesia's crackdown on IUU fishing is paying off for domestic fisheries and fish recovery, according to a 2018 study (<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/04/indonesias-crackdown-on-illegal-fishing-is-paying-off-study-finds/>). It showed that foreign fishing activity in Indonesia had declined by more than 90%, and total fishing by 25%, since 2014, when the government banned foreign fishing boats from its waters, among other restrictions.

Much of the narratives revolving around illegal fishing in Indonesian waters has centered on foreign trawlers depleting scarce marine resources, subsequently leading local fishers to turn to sea crime. The authors of the new study, however, make the case that the negative association between maritime piracy and illegal fishing boils down to it being easier for individuals fishing illegally to turn to another illegal activity. And in this case, piracy stands out as a high-risk but high-reward substitute for locals who have historically engaged in illegal fishing.

An Indonesian Navy member keeps watch on the Hua Li 8 shortly after the fishing vessel was seized off the coast of Sumatra. Image by Ayat S. Karokaro/Mongabay Indonesia.

Imam Prakoso, a senior maritime security analyst with the think tank Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative, who was not involved in the study, reviewed its findings at Mongabay's request. He said the correlation between reduced IUU fishing and increased maritime piracy was still presumptive and needed a case sample from the ground to support it.

Some key contexts are absent from the research, Imam added, such as whether the increase in maritime piracy linked to reduced IUU fishing is occurring throughout the country's vast archipelago. "Indonesia's waters are too big to make conclusive correlations between IUUF and sea piracy," he said.

The study authors have called for more studies to look into the issue, particularly to assess whether or how government measures against illegal fishing offset the cost of piracy. They also noted a lack of enforcement resources to patrol the country's waters. "It's important to note that this research does not refute the notion that foreign trawlers produce dissatisfied local fishers who turn towards piracy as a defense against foreign intruders," said study co-author Daniel Pauly, principal investigator with the Sea Around Us. "But it questions its intrinsic and relatively simplistic argument that illegal fishing is only done by foreign criminals, seemingly acknowledging the nationalistic narrative of the perpetrators seeking to justify their actions. Illegal fishing is more complex, often consisting of the nexus between foreign and local perpetrators." Imam said tackling maritime piracy in Indonesia requires collaboration with neighboring countries to develop joint navigation security databases on vessels operating in high-traffic waters such as the Malacca Strait. He said Indonesia currently lacks coordination and operational capability for effective law enforcement, adding the country still doesn't have a law on maritime security.

"Addressing sea piracy is the next big challenge that Indonesia must face after IUU fishing," Imam said. "The participation of the people and all sea users is also no less important in maintaining Indonesia's maritime security."

An Indonesian Navy member guards Indonesian deckhands working aboard a foreign fishing vessel operating illegally in the country's waters. Image by Yoga Eka Saputra/Mongabay Indonesia.

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