

A fifth of world's fish landings 'are illegal'

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About a fifth of the world's fish landings are illegal and the proportion is increasing, adding to the global problem of declining fish stocks, scientists have said.

Researchers said fishermen should be included in decision-making

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The global illegal catch is reckoned at between £1 and £4.5 billion a year, according to a study carried out for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

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The body also known as the World Conservation Union said declining fish stocks and growing consumer demand for marine food were encouraging corrupt fishing practices and even the false labelling of products as "eco-fish".

Research showed there were incidents of officials taking bribes, of renaming and mislabelling of fish products, of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, exceeding of quotas, piracy and harassment of observers.

Corruption in fisheries ranged from the fishermen themselves right up to officials and governments on a national and international level.

Ahead of a meeting in Washington on fisheries and corruption organised by the IUCN and hosted by the World Bank, a briefing paper for the conservation organisation said illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing accounted for an estimated 16 million tonnes in 2002.

It is getting worse as wild-caught fish become scarcer and demand grows, the IUCN warned.

According to the international conservation group, corruption undermines scientific monitoring of fisheries because it means official estimates for how much fish is being removed from the seas are lower than actual figures.

As a consequence, those managing fisheries are likely to set quotas that are too high to be sustainable.

The IUCN is calling for better enforcement of current rules, better tracing and labelling of fish and the introduction of satellite tracking of fishing vessels to cut corruption.

Carl Gustaf Lundin, the organisation's head of global marine programme, said: "The large-scale occurrence of corruption adds insult to injury.

"The world's global fish stocks are already severely depleted and this is just making the situation worse."

Andrew Hurd, programme deputy head, added: "Scientists' evidence is not being taken into consideration when it comes to management decisions on fisheries and quotas.

"Fisheries managers should be held accountable when ignoring scientific evidence."

The paper by researchers at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada, said corruption can be found throughout the industry from the international level down to the ships on the water.

In many instances fishers exceed quotas, discard much of the catch and mis-label their haul to dodge regulations, while some have been caught smuggling illegally caught fish hidden under legitimate catches.

Juvenile fish are also frequently caught and in some cases used as bait instead of being released, the research said.

In England, fishermen had been known to re-label excess cod as "ling" to get it ashore.

Middlemen are also mislabelling fish as sustainably caught, which undermines the work of genuine "eco-fish" campaigns, adds to the degradation of fisheries and can have adverse effects on human health, the researchers said.

The briefing paper said the number of fishing vessels sailing under flags of convenience, which allow them to avoid taxes, pay low wages and are a cover for all kinds of illegal activity, had increased drastically since the 1990s.

Mongolia, the world's largest landlocked country provides flags for hundreds of ships at sea, while Liberia has the most foreign ships sailing under its flag.

On a national level regulations are often not enforced and the corruption also extends into the international political arena.

Access deals negotiated by the EU, giving the European fleet access to West African waters, lacked transparency and undervalued the resources they were exploiting.

The researchers said fines for illegal fishing needed to be increased, fishermen included in decision-making, international trade made more transparent and fisheries reduced to sustainable levels that could be policed effectively.

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