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SUMMARY

Nature and Extent of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in the Mediterranean Sea

by

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Countries/States

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Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is one of the most serious threats to sustainable fisheries in the Mediterranean Sea. Due to IUU fishing, which also encompasses ghost fishing and bycatch (of cetaceans, sea turtles, seabirds and sharks), depletion of fishing stocks and destruction of the benthic ecosystems occur. This issue also has several social, economic and legal ramifications. Most of the coastal States in the region adhere to counter-IUU fishing practices, including through the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean of the FAO (GFCM). However, most of them do not necessarily have records of bycatch, ghost fishing and crimes related to fisheries.

In the Mediterranean Sea purseine, trawl and driftnets are most used fishing gears in IUU fishing whereas bluefin tuna, swordfish and shrimps, among benthic species, are the most common target by vessels from both GFCM Members and non-Members. Among the most known negative impacts of IUU fishing unfair competition, loss of biodiversity, loss of income and at times threats to human lives and safety deserve to be singled out. Consequently, IUU fishing is increasingly drawing the attention of GFCM Members at regional and sub-regional level. Together with FAO, several studies, initiatives and measures have been crafted for combatting IUU fishing.

Lower and upper estimates of the current total loss per year due to IUU fishing worldwide are USD 9 billion and USD 24 billion, respectively, representing between 11 and 26 million tonnes of fish globally (Agnew *et al.* 2009). It is possible that the situation has even deteriorated since the time this estimation was made. In addition, INTERPOL has launched a project (ProjectScale) as a global initiative to detect, suppress and combat fisheries crimes which are estimated to cost to the global economy up to USD 23 billion each year. Like IUU fishing, to which they are often times associated, fisheries crimes threaten food security and livelihoods and can destabilize vulnerable coastal States.

From a regional perspective, the nature and extent of IUU fishing in the Mediterranean Sea is not clearly known at present. It is known, however, that these dubious activities are becoming a common practice in recent years. Suffices to recall that in the Mediterranean and Black Sea (Area 37) 50 % of the fish stocks are already overfished according to Ye and Cochrane (2011). It is hard to question that IUU fishing has a lot to do with this dramatic situation. Mediterranean riparian States currently report several IUU fishing related issues. Some of them have short coastlines and are engaged mostly in small scale fishing, thus the fishing pressure is relatively weak, which consequently results in the pressure by IUU fishing remaining at a low level. Nonetheless, in the case of small scale fishing IUU fishing activities are usually carried out in coastal areas in waters up to 50 meters of depth. These coastal areas are generally covered by the Mediterranean endemic *Posidonia* meadows. As these areas often time present muddy and sandy bottoms, they are suitable for trawling for mainly demersal fish and invertebrates.

Some other Mediterranean riparian States mainly practice industrial fishing, thus causing more detrimental effects to the marine environment and its resources when IUU fishing occurs. Due to decreasing amount of fish caught in industrial fisheries, oversized fishing fleets and rising demand for fish, the negative impacts of IUU fishing will exacerbate and make it increasingly widespread and profitable for those involved (Flothmann *et al.* 2013). Overexploitation of the fish stocks is reported across the Mediterranean where more than 65% of commercial stocks are fished beyond sustainable limits. Some species such as Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) and dusky grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*), have been fished to such an extent that they are both listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List.

A precise estimation of the economic damage caused by IUU fishing in the Mediterranean Sea is not possible because of data uncertainty and paucity. The effects it entails on the other hand are fairly known and spans from deterioration of fish stocks and habitats, to loss of sales tax, income and employment, disturbances to the supply chain and fishing operations. Furthermore, IUU fisheries cause ghost fisheries (abandoned nets) when the fishers abandon their nets to try and escape from coast guards or other relevant authorities. Ghost fisheries occurs when organisms such as dogfish, stingrays and dolphins, are entangled to the nets and die, strand to the shore or sink to the bottom.

Concerning by-catch of the non-target species, the loggerhead turtle *Caretta caretta* and green turtle *Chelonia mydas* are endangered species in the Mediterranean Sea. These species are impacted by illegal fishing activities due to bottom trawling and set nets. Cetaceans are also impacted by the illegal fishing practices, due in particular to illegal driftnets. Some NGO's, such as Marevivo, Legambeinte, Lav, Oceana and PEW, reported that IUU fishing and by-catch issues were quite common in several GFCM Members in recent years.

The picture could get worse depending on the fishing gears, seasons and areas associated to IUU fishing because impacts on marine life and ecosystems vary considerably. For example, deep trawling has impacts on sea grass beds and causes physical damages destroying benthic community and habitat loss for many species, such as endemic sponges *Axinella cannabina*. In the case of clams, IUU fishing undermines their habitats (i.e. use of prohibited fishing gears in clam harvesting) and their dredging affects soft bottom communities and siltation, which is harmful for macro and meio benthos. Furthermore, IUU fishing of bivalve organisms and their marketing may cause fatal results if toxic plankton bloom occurs.

There are some legislation and regulations in force in the Mediterranean Sea to fight against IUU fishing. For EU States there is a strict body of law applying, which in some instances (EU Regulation 1005/2008) also contains provisions for Third States. However, and regardless on any judgement on these provisions, uniform norms and regulations for all riparian States can be brought about solely through the GFCM. This forum, in light also of its institutional links with the FAO as well as of the ongoing reform of the Commission, presents a unique opportunity to tackle IUU fishing at regional and sub-regional level. Several recommendations have been already adopted by the GFCM and efforts will intensify in the near future to come to grips with this scourge. Nevertheless, all GFCM Members, in their capacity of flag States, are responsible to ensure that their fleet do not engage in IUU fishing and are obliged to take the necessary measures in turn, according also to relevant international treaties (i.e. UNCLOS, UNFSA, FAO Compliance Agreement and FAO Port State Measures Agreement).

Because bluefin tuna stocks are depleted in the Mediterranean Sea, there is a need to elaborate and implement robust and efficient recovery plans to combat IUU fishing. To this end, cooperation between GFCM and ICCAT should be strengthened. This should include sustainable aquaculture from eggs of bluefin tuna, which should be further promoted by both organizations in light of their expertise and considering that aquaculture could be one of the best solutions for stock recovery and mitigation of IUU fishing activities in the Mediterranean Sea. Encouraging precedents exist as in Japan they have recently succeeded to breed bluefin tuna for the last ten years. It is also reported that some European companies already have started experiments and succeeded to a certain level of breeding.

Aware of the fact that IUU fishing demands for continuous attention not only from States but for a wide variety of actors and stakeholders, establishing special working group on IUU fishing under

the GFCM umbrella should be advised. This body, whose creation was originally proposed in 2004 in connection with the first FAO/GFCM workshop on IUU fishing in the Mediterranean Sea, should be inspired to the same approaches of participation and transparency which are at the cornerstone of the GFCM Task Force. Fortunately, no fishing casualty due to IUU fishing has been reported to date in the Mediterranean Sea, unlike the case of the Black Sea where several casualties occurred of late years in turbot fisheries. Still, this issue should be closely monitored by the proposed special working group.

In addition to setting up an institutional setting endowed with the responsibility of ensuring that necessary controls are performed from the net to the plate, the GFCM should also promote the fight against IUU fishing through other initiatives. This could include building awareness (i.e. a special day for IUU fishing could be organized in all Mediterranean together with other organizations, stakeholders and partners), slow food and marine stewardship initiatives so that consumers become more cautious and selective when they purchase seafood and increased reliance on area-based management tools. For all these purposes, closer cooperation will be needed as well as an ad hoc network to be possibly created and spearheaded by the GFCM. Ongoing developments within the GFCM (i.e. the Symposium on Small-Scale Fisheries, the adoption of memoranda of understanding, etc.) point to the feasibility of concerted actions to halt IUU fishing.