



Why Fishing Vessels Need Mandatory, Unique Identification Numbers

The Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission should take a key step toward ending illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in the eastern Pacific Ocean

Overview

Unlike merchant ships, cars, and even cellphones, industrial fishing vessels are not required to have unique, permanent identifying numbers. Fishing vessels do have names, call signs, and other identifiers, but those can be changed by the owner quickly and easily. Further, such identifiers are not systematically included in relevant communications. This makes it easy for owners to hide their vessels' true identities if they want to—for example, if the vessels are being used in illicit activities.

Illegal activity on the high seas is rampant. Due to gaps in international fisheries policies, operators can evade accountability in numerous ways, allowing them to ignore catch quotas; fish without licenses; use destructive gear; and otherwise flout rules intended to make fishing fair, sustainable, and environmentally sound. In addition, illegal fishing is linked to other serious crimes in the eastern Pacific Ocean, including drug trafficking and human smuggling, as documented by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. The lack of transparency for identifying fishing vessels helps criminal fishermen conceal their crimes.

Thus The Pew Charitable Trusts is calling on the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, or IATTC, to take decisive steps to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated, or IUU, fishing. This can be done by requiring International Maritime Organization, or IMO, numbers for all vessels at least 24 meters in length that fish in waters managed by the commission. From research presented in this brief, Pew finds numerous errors and inconsistencies in data used to identify vessels authorized to fish in IATTC waters. By mandating IMO numbers, the commission could eliminate such problems.

How an International Maritime Organization number requirement would help

Mandatory IMO numbers on fishing vessels would help authorities and fisheries managers monitor vessel activity at sea and in port. Research published in the journal *Science* in 2010 cited the lack of these numbers on fishing vessels as a prime factor in the failure of port officials to identify and take action against operators engaged in illegal activities.¹ That study looked at vessels already on IUU lists maintained by regional fishery management organizations, including IATTC, that set policies for commercial fishing on the high seas.

By requiring IMO numbers, which are unique and permanent, these regional management organizations and the flag States that make up their membership could take a significant step toward preventing fraud, ensuring the safety and security of fishing operations, and promoting fairness for law-abiding commercial fishermen and vessel owners.

Why IMO numbers are the best unique vessel identifiers

The IMO number system was introduced in 1987 to enhance safety, hold polluters accountable, and curtail fraud. The numbers are widely recognized as reliable and unique for identifying vessels in the global merchant fleet. The system has a proven record, thanks in part to the credible and cross-checked database that supports it.

International support is rising for a global fishing vessel identification system

Several international bodies have called the IMO number system the best available for easily and quickly identifying fishing vessels: the Kobe meetings of the tuna regional fisheries management organizations; the workshops on the Consolidated List of Authorized Vessels, of tuna regional fisheries management organizations; and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.² In 2011 the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources required an IMO number for all vessels authorized to target toothfish in the Southern Ocean.³

Tracking vessels: A closer look at the IATTC

The IATTC does not require authorized vessels to have IMO numbers. Even when ships have these numbers, the commission does not require them to be submitted for inclusion in vessel records. In April 2013, Pew cross-checked the commission's vessel records with the database of fishing vessels maintained by IHS Fairplay, a division of the global information company IHS Inc. and the sole organization issuing IMO numbers, in an attempt to determine how many vessels are identified by the IATTC with their IMO numbers. The IATTC does not keep a publicly accessible database of all authorized vessels,⁴ so Pew relied on commission data published in the Consolidated List of Authorized Vessels, dated Aug. 30, 2012.⁵ Because the consolidated list may not be entirely current, this review should be considered preliminary.

Of the 200 entries for vessels 24 meters or longer in the consolidated list of ships authorized by the commission, 145 vessels (73 percent) have obtained IMO numbers from IHS Fairplay (see Table 1); IHS Fairplay maintains the official global record of vessels over 100 gross tonnes, with data as far back as the 18th century. When considering vessels 20 to 24 meters in length, Pew's preliminary analysis shows that 1,100 (62 percent) of the 1,762 vessels listed have IHS Fairplay-issued IMO numbers (Table 2).

Vessels 24 meters or longer with IMO numbers authorized to fish in IATTC waters, by flag State*

Flag State	Total IATTC vessels	Vessels with IMO number	Percentage of vessels with IMO number
Belize	4	3	75%
Canada	7	7	100%
China	48	31	65%
Chinese Taipei**	19	3	16%
Colombia	0	0	N/A
Cook Islands	3	3	100%
Costa Rica	4	0	0%
Ecuador	14	9	64%
El Salvador	1	1	100%
France	0	0	N/A
Guatemala	2	2	100%
Japan	23	23	100%
Kiribati	0	0	N/A
South Korea	28	20	71%
Mexico	4	4	100%
Nicaragua	2	2	100%
Panama	10	6	60%
Peru	0	0	N/A
Portugal	0	0	N/A
Spain	17	17	100%
United States	14	14	100%
Vanuatu	0	0	N/A
Venezuela	0	0	N/A
Total	200	145	73%

Source: Consolidated List of Authorized Vessels, Aug. 30, 2012, <http://www.tuna-org.org/GlobalTVR.htm>

* Data may not be up to date, so analysis should be considered preliminary.

** This is the official name that Taiwan uses to join international organizations in which China is also a member.

Vessels between 20 and 24 meters with IMO numbers authorized to fish in the IATTC area, by flag State*

Flag State	Total IATTC vessels	Vessels with IMO number	Percentage of vessels with IMO number
Belize	27	5	19%
Canada	9	1	11%
China	121	34	28%
Chinese Taipei**	147	86	59%
Colombia	12	11	92%
Cook Islands	2	1	50%
Costa Rica	107	2	2%
Ecuador	122	87	71%
El Salvador	8	4	50%
France	14	7	50%
Guatemala	6	3	50%
Japan	306	301	98%
Kiribati	1	1	100%
South Korea	168	145	86%
Mexico	96	35	36%
Nicaragua	8	5	63%
Panama	154	29	19%
Peru	1	1	100%
Portugal	10	10	100%
Spain	110	92	84%
United States	262	172	66%
Vanuatu	53	51	96%
Venezuela	18	17	94%
Total	1,762	1,100	62%

Source: Consolidated List of Authorized Vessels, Aug. 30, 2012, <http://www.tuna-org.org/GlobalTVR.htm>

* Data may not be up to date, so analysis should be considered preliminary.

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Of the 16 flag States with vessels 24 meters or longer operating in commission-managed waters, nine flag States have all their vessels identified with IMO numbers, five flag States have 60 percent or more of their vessels identified with the numbers, and only two flag States have 16 percent or fewer of their vessels identified.

This review indicates a large number of discrepancies between the consolidated list data for the IATTC and the IHS Fairplay data. This could be because:

- **Vessel information is out-of-date:** Seven vessels listed as authorized to fish for tuna on the consolidated list are recorded as broken up or “total loss” on IHS Fairplay’s list.
- **Radio call signs are unreliable vessel identifiers:** 49 vessels have the wrong radio call sign in the IATTC records.
- **Ship names are unreliable for identifying vessels:** 110 vessels have the wrong name or misspellings in their name.
- **Flag State information for vessels is unreliable:** 26 vessels have different flags listed with IATTC and IHS Fairplay.

By requiring IMO numbers for all fishing vessels at least 24 meters in length, the commission would increase transparency in its records and improve vessel identification and monitoring in its convention area and by port authorities in the region.

What the IATTC can do

Mandatory use and reporting of IMO numbers coupled with a proven, verified database would help the IATTC and its 22 members better identify, license, and manage vessels and more quickly expose illicit activity on the water. At its June 2013 annual meeting in Veracruz, Mexico, Pew calls on the commission to:

- Require that IATTC vessel records include IMO numbers for ships that already have such numbers. To this end, the commission should amend Resolutions C-11-05, C-11-06, and C-12-07 to include a vessel’s IMO number as a mandatory information requirement.⁶
- Commit to require IMO numbers for all vessels at least 24 meters long—or operating in waters outside the exclusive economic zone of the vessel’s flag State—that are authorized to fish in IATTC waters. The commission also should require that IMO numbers be reported in all records and relevant communications involving these vessels.

For further information, please visit:

pewenvironment.org/endillegalfishing

Contacts

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Endnotes

- 1 Stefan Flothmann et al., "Closing Loopholes: Getting Illegal Fishing Under Control," *Science* 328 (5983) (2010):1235-36, www.sciencemag.org/content/328/5983/1235
- 2 Report of the Joint Meeting of Tuna RFMOs (2007), p. 2 and Appendix 14; the first and second Workshops on Exchange of Information and Maintenance of the Consolidated List of Authorized Vessels of Tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organizations, T-RFMO CLAV Technical Report No. 1, 2011, p. 8 (tuna-org.org/Documents/other/TRFMO_CLAV_2011.pdf), and T-RFMO CLAV Technical Report No. 2, 2012 (tuna-org.org/Documents/other/TRFMO_CLAV_2012.pdf); FAO Technical Consultation to Identify a Structure and Strategy for the Development and Implementation of the Global Record of Fishing Vessels, Refrigerated Transport Vessels and Supply Vessels, Report No. 956 FIRO/R956 (En) (2010), p. 3 (fao.org/docrep/013/i1938e/i1938e00.pdf); and Thirtieth Session of the Committee on Fisheries, FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Report No. 1012 FIPI/R1012 (En), p. 9 and para. 56 (fao.org/cofi/28868-08d89e67cab4794708d710de7bc4428cc.pdf).
- 3 Suggested amendments would be to add "IMO number (if any)" in para. 2.a) of Resolution C-11-05 on the Establishment of a List of Longline Fishing Vessels over 24 Meters (LSTLFVs) Authorized to Operate in the Eastern Pacific Ocean (iattc.org/PDFFiles2/Resolutions/C-11-05-Amended-resolution-C-03-07-Large-LL-vessels.pdf); para. 2.a) of Resolution C-11-06 on a Regional Vessel Register (iattc.org/PDFFiles2/Resolutions/C-11-06-Amendment-C-00-06-Vessel-Register.pdf); and para.7 of Resolution C-12-07, Amendment to Resolution C-11-09 on Establishing a Program for Transshipments by Large-Scale Fishing Vessels (iattc.org/PDFFiles2/Resolutions/C-12-07-Amendment-C-11-09-Transshipments.pdf)
- 4 Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, "Vessel Database," last modified Aug. 30, 2012, iattc.org/VesselRegister/VesselList.aspx?List=RegVessels&Lang=ENG.
- 5 Tuna-org, "Global List of Authorized Tuna Fishing Vessels," tuna-org.org/GlobalTVR.htm.
- 6 Suggested amendments would be to add "IMO number (if any)" in para. 2.a) of Resolution C-11-05 on the Establishment of a List of Longline Fishing Vessels over 24 Meters (LSTLFVs) Authorized to Operate in the Eastern Pacific Ocean; para. 2.a) of Resolution C-11-06 on a Regional Vessel Register; and para.7 of Resolution C-12-07, Amendment to Resolution C-11-09 on Establishing a Program for Transshipments by Large-Scale Fishing Vessels.

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