

# **A Positive Step Toward The Conservation and Sustainable Use of Eritrea's Living Marine Resources**



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Last week, Eritrea signed on to the Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO) Agreement on Port State Measures. The move is a significant and welcome step toward more effectively combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the region, and it is expected to play a positive role in contributing to the long-term conservation and sustainable use of Eritrea's living marine resources and marine ecosystems. The following several paragraphs discuss several important points and provide a brief general overview.

## **What is the Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA)?**

Formally known as the Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing, the PSMA was approved by the FAO, a specialized agency of the United Nations, in November 2009. Several years later, in June 2016, it entered into force after the minimum threshold for signatures and ratifications had been surpassed. With Eritrea recently joining the PMSA, the total number of PSMA parties has now reached 100 states. (Angola, Morocco, and Nigeria also recently became parties to the PSMA.)

The PSMA is the first binding international agreement to specifically target IUU fishing, and its chief objective is to prevent, deter, and eliminate IUU fishing by the adoption and implementation of effective port state measures, such as preventing vessels engaged in such activities from using ports and landing their catches. As a result, the PSMA significantly reduces the incentive of such vessels to continue to operate while it also blocks fishery products derived through IUU fishing from reaching national and international markets. Overall, adhering to best practice and effective implementation of the PSMA is increasingly regarded as among the most cost-effective means to curb IUU fishing (for instance, using patrol vessels to track illegal operators on the open seas can be much more expensive and far less safe).

**What is illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing? What are some of the main issues or related concerns?**

According to the FAO, IUU fishing includes fishing and fishing-related activities that are conducted in contravention of national, regional, and international laws; non-reporting, misreporting or under-reporting of information on fishing operations and their catches; fishing by “stateless” vessels; fishing in areas under the mandate of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations by non-party vessels; and fishing activities which are not regulated by states and cannot be easily monitored and accounted for.

While estimates slightly vary according to source, around one in every five fish caught around the world every year is thought to originate from IUU fishing, while IUU fishing is believed to account for approximately 26 million tonnes of fish caught annually (which can come to around \$23.5 billion worth of seafood each year). IUU fishing remains among the greatest threats to marine ecosystems due to its potent ability to undermine global efforts to manage fisheries sustainably as well as endeavours to conserve marine biodiversity. IUU is also broad; it is found in all types and dimensions of fisheries, occurs both on the high seas and in areas within national jurisdictions, and concerns all aspects and stages of the capture and utilisation of fish. Of particular note, it can sometimes be closely intertwined with organized crime or other illegal activities.

In addition to the above, IUU fishing can pose a threat to sustainable livelihoods, exacerbate poverty, and harm efforts to tackle food insecurity. For instance, IUU often results in the removal of resources available to legal, bona fide fishers, which can negatively impact regulated or small-scale fisheries, with small-scale fisheries in developing countries tending to be particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, the products derived from IUU fishing may find their way into overseas trade markets, thus negatively impacting local food supply.

### **How about Eritrea's coastal region and marine resources?**

Although Eritrea is not the largest in terms of geographic area – total land area in the country is approximately 124,320 km<sup>2</sup> – it contains a wide range of ecosystem types. Among the most important, unique, and richly diverse are the coastal marine and island ecosystems along the Red Sea. Along with the country's islands, Eritrea's total shoreline, stretching from its northern border with Sudan to its southern border with Djibouti, spans approximately 3,500 km, making it one of the longest in all of Africa. (It is behind Madagascar, Somalia, South Africa, Mozambique, and Egypt.) In total, Eritrea's territorial waters cover an area of about 55,000 km<sup>2</sup>, while the country has well over 350 islands of varying sizes, with most of them concentrated within the Dahlak archipelago, east of Massawa. (The largest island is Dahlak Kebir, with other prominent ones being Nora, Hawakil, and Dissei.)

The pristine waters off Eritrea's hundreds of islands and its extensive mainland coastline contain over 1,100 fish species and 44 genera of hard coral, resulting in one of the highest recorded levels of endemism and species diversity for a water body. Remarkably, around 18 percent of fish species and 20 percent of coral species are reported to be endemic to these waters. According to different estimates, the approximate annual maximum sustainable yield of marine fish resources is in the tens of thousands of tonnes. As well, between 380- 400 km of the Eritrean mainland and islands coastlines are occupied by mangrove forests, with three of the seven mangrove species present in the Red Sea found on the Eritrean coast, while seagrasses also form an integral part of the coastal biodiversity.



Of course, Eritrea's coastal regions are also home to many local communities and villages (made up of several different ethnic groups), a vital source of livelihoods for many, of considerable and growing socioeconomic importance, and host to Eritrea's two main ports, Massawa and Assab.

Meanwhile, the Red Sea, along which Eritrea is located, is a pivotal global waterway that extends from the Suez Canal at the north and the Bab El-Mandeb Strait to the south. Not only does it boast marine resources and fish stocks, it also plays a crucial role in the global maritime trade by connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean. It is estimated that more than 10 percent of all seaborne cargo passes through its waters annually.

### **A significant and welcome step**

Although it is widely overlooked, IUU fishing remains a terrible scourge with devastating impacts worldwide. Combined with its longstanding domestic sustainability, regulatory, and security efforts relating to marine resources, through becoming a party to the PSMA Eritrea has not only demonstrated strong commitment to multilateral cooperation and combating IUU fishing, it has also taken a positive step toward boosting the sustainability of fisheries, protecting the livelihoods of many individuals and communities, and the long-term conservation of its marine ecosystems.

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