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The plan to ban fishing in more than half the world's oceans

A handful of countries are putting fish stocks at risk by exploiting the riches of the high seas, but conservationists are working on a scheme to stop them



Deadliest catch?

Dan Rafla/Aurora Photos

By **James Randerson**

IT IS one of the planet's last true wildernesses, yet a handful of the world's wealthiest nations are plundering its riches to satisfy the appetites of luxury consumers – all with the help of billions in public money.

The great blue wilderness in question is the “high seas” – the 58 per cent of the ocean outside the 200-nautical-mile limit that defines the area each coastal country can exploit as an exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The vast majority of the high seas is a fishing free-for-all with almost no legal protection, but now a bold idea is taking root: why not ban fishing there altogether?

The plan might seem an impossible conservation dream, especially with a new US president who has rejected internationalist foreign policy and environmental protections, but it has been gaining momentum. At the [Our Ocean conference](#), hosted by the US Department of State in Washington DC in September, Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) spoke warmly about the notion of placing the high seas off limits. Turning this vast area of ocean into a marine protected area would be “an extraordinary step”, he argued.

The notion has obvious appeal for conservationists, but that isn't enough by itself. The fact that talk of a ban has reached diplomatic circles is testament to the persistence of a handful of marine scientists who have steadily built the ecological, economic and social case underpinning it.

The idea was put on the map in 2014 by [Christopher Costello](#) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who tackled one of the

chief objections. Seafood is a vital source of protein for the world's population, so if a high seas fishing ban were to slash the global catch significantly, the idea would be a non-starter.

The raw numbers suggest that is the case. In the first decade of the 21st century, the high seas accounted for around 12 per cent of the global average annual catch of 80 million tonnes, worth around \$109 billion. Critics of a ban cite the loss of jobs and economic value from high seas fishing vessels, though working conditions on such ships are far from ideal (see [“It’s a hard life at sea”](#)).

“They are exploiting the global commons. We are talking about big fishing mafia”

But Costello showed that the economics make sense. He modelled global fish stocks, taking into account migration between high seas and coastal zones, and found that a high seas ban is likely to have clear benefits for coastal fisheries, where most fishing takes place (*PLoS Biology*, [doi.org/bs3d](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.100233d)).

The model suggests seafood populations would recover in the high seas and then spill out into the EEZs, increasing fish caught by more than 30 per cent and more than doubling profits. This is partly because the most highly prized species tend to be migratory ones such as bluefin tuna, sharks and swordfish.

“It was basically a thought experiment,” said [Jennifer Jacquet](#) at New York University, who spoke about the feasibility of a ban at the Pew Marine Fellows annual meeting in Noordwijk, the Netherlands, in October. “But it planted a seed.”

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](#)

Winners and losers

Of course, some seafood would be off the menu entirely – but not much. Of the average annual 10 million tonne high-seas catch, just 0.03 per cent consists of species found only there.

This is backed up by a list of the species that would be affected by a ban, which mentions 585 species that migrate between the coastal zones and high seas, and just 19 found only in the high seas (*Scientific Reports*, [doi.org/bs3f](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-28318-8)). These include such unappetising-sounding fare as the sandpaper fish, spiny icefish, Antarctic tooth fish and blunt scalyhead.

The study also predicted that populations of migratory fish would only have to increase by 18 per cent as a result of a ban for the net impact on global fisheries to be positive. Costello found there would be a 42 per cent increase, which would boost world fishery value by \$13 billion as the benefits spill into EEZs.

And a ban would share that wealth around. At the moment, just four countries – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Spain – account for nearly half of all high seas fishing, as measured by landed value ([see map](#)). “They are exploiting the global commons without paying properly for the right to access those resources,” says Enric Sala of the National Geographic Society, who spoke at the Our Oceans meeting. “We are talking about big fishing mafia.”

So like a nautical Robin Hood, a ban would take from the rich and give to the poorest nations, whose own coastal waters are being deprived of migratory fish by the high seas trawlers. “Globally we will benefit but you are going to have losers,” says [Rashid Sumaila](#) at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

If a ban were to boost migratory species by 42 per cent, Costello found that 135 countries and territories (mainly developing nations) would enjoy a net gain, seven would experience no change and 50 would lose out. In particular, South Korea and Taiwan

would suffer losses of over \$500 million each.

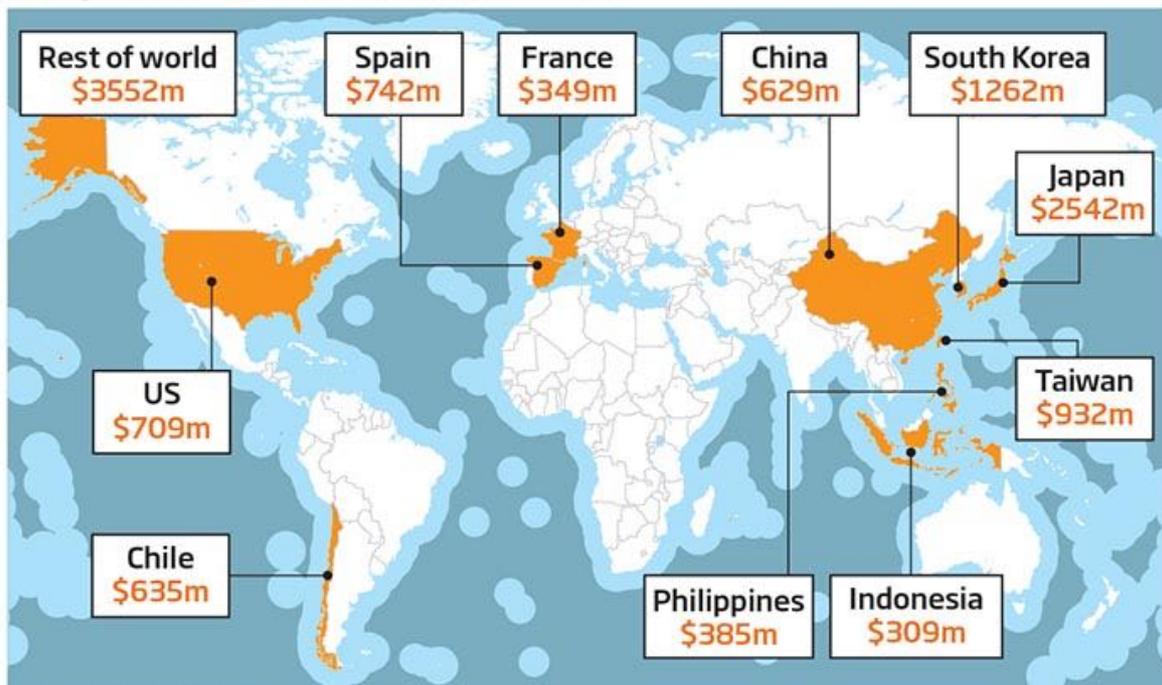
No prizes for guessing who will oppose a ban then, but conservationists have another argument up their sleeve. High seas fishing only makes economic sense because of piles of public money subsidising ship-building and fuel costs. Sumaila estimates that the total annual subsidy for high seas fishing amounts to around \$3 billion globally.

“Fishing on the high seas would not be possible without the huge subsidies that countries are giving to that industrial fishing fleet,” Sala told Our Oceans. In fact, it would be losing around \$2.4 billion a year.

A big haul

Ten countries are responsible for 70 per cent of global high seas fishing, as measured by the average annual landed value

● High-seas ● Exclusive economic zones



SOURCE: SCIENTIFIC REPORTS, doi.org/bs3f; PLOS BIOLOGY, doi.org/bs3d

So could a high seas ban be workable? Most nations already agree on the goal of protecting 10 per cent of the oceans by 2020, though we aren't there yet. Even with recent gains such as the creation in October of the world's [largest marine protected area in the Antarctic Ross Sea](#), just 4 per cent of the ocean is protected.

But some conservationists worry that campaigning for a high seas ban would distract from an existing UN process to create smaller marine protected areas. "I'm torn – really torn," says Kristina Gjerde at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Countries like Japan will react very negatively to any mention of a ban, she says, but it can't be done without getting them on board. Others counter-argue that the threat of a total ban would give impetus to the existing UN plans.

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Either way, conservationists shouldn't give up on this ambitious goal, says Jacquet. Accommodating the losers may look difficult or even impossible, but the [Paris climate agreement](#), which came into force in record time last month, shows what can be achieved when there is political will in the face of disagreement. High seas fishing ought to be a diplomatic walk in the park by comparison.

"I actually think this is a way easier political deal than climate change," she says, "You're talking about luxury fish."

It's a hard life at sea

Working conditions on high seas fishing vessels vary considerably, but they include some of the worst in the industry. "There would be rats and cockroaches on the boats," says John Robidoux, a former fishing observer

in Canada who often spent months at sea watching the working practices on foreign vessels.

Many ships are vast factories in which workers haul in the catch, then process and pack it on board for sale. Other boats often meet the factory ship to transport the catch to shore, allowing the factory to remain on the high seas for long periods.

As profit margins have tightened, unscrupulous operators have squeezed their employees to make the sums add up. “As we have eaten most of the world’s fish it has become increasingly difficult to remain profitable,” says [John Hocevar](#), Oceans Campaigns Director at Greenpeace.

In many cases, this means that poor and vulnerable workers from countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines are duped into accepting minimal wages with no worker protections – slave labour in effect. “Their passports are often confiscated and they can be trapped on the boats at sea for months or even more than a year,” says Hocevar.