

Marauders continue to plunder the oceans

[Click to Print](#)

07 November 2005

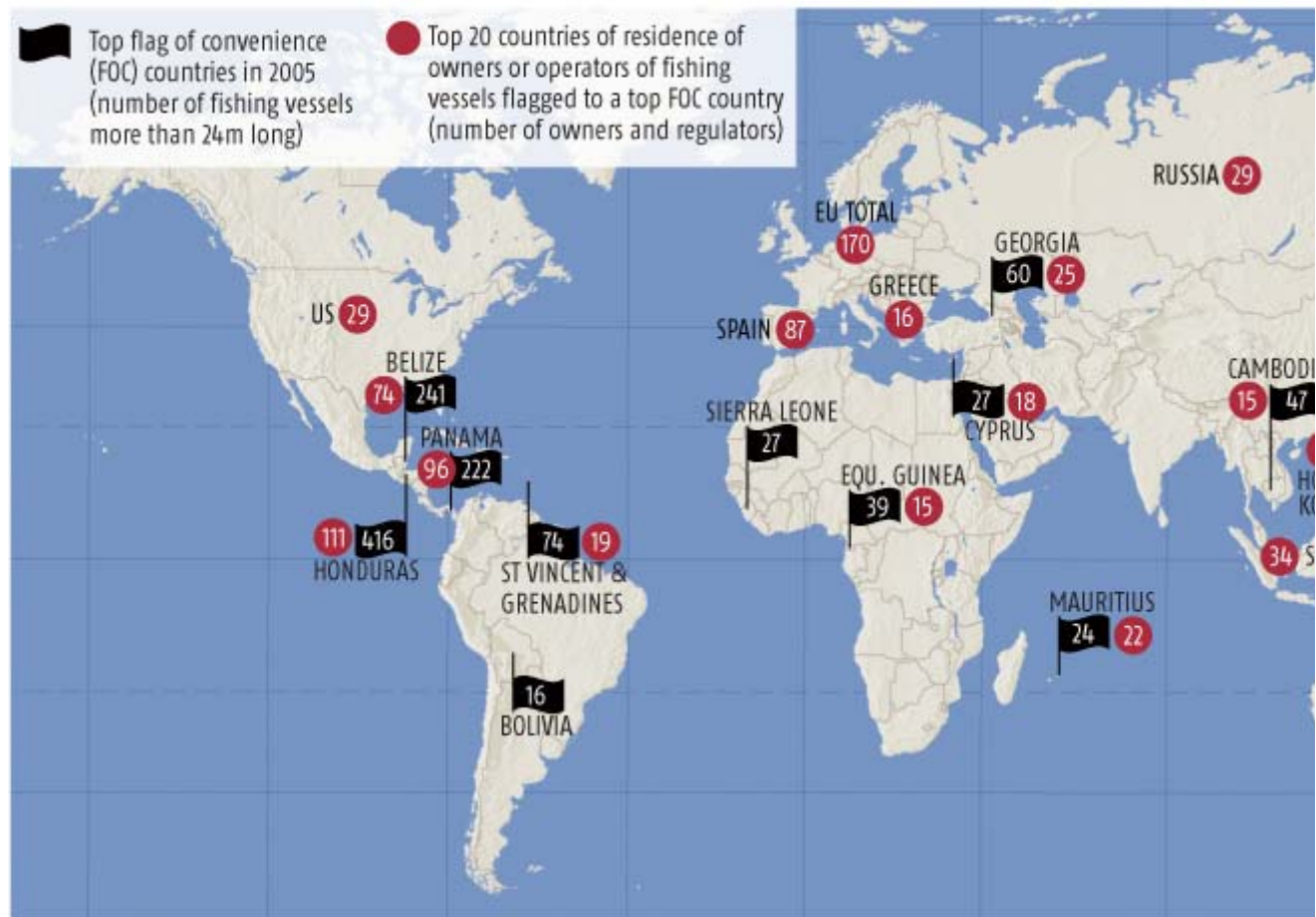
NewScientist.com news service

Emma Young

James Randerson

FLAGS OF CONVENIENCE

A thriving legal loophole allows companies to register ships abroad to make use of slack regulations



Flags of convenience

THE biodiversity of the oceans is as seriously threatened as ever, despite efforts to conserve it, according to two new reports. Plans to set up protected areas are proceeding woefully slowly, illegal fishing is thriving, and international pledges to improve matters are achieving little.

Both reports focus on the high seas beyond the 360-kilometre limit of national exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The high seas are especially problematic because they are not governed by any single nation, which means the rules are often complicated and difficult to police.

One way of protecting marine life is by establishing marine protected areas (MPAs) in which fishing is restricted. Marine biodiversity needs global protection, "and building a global network of MPAs is fundamental to that", says Gilly Llewellyn, programme manager of oceans at conservation group

WWF-Australia. "One of the current gaps and biggest challenges is to establish MPAs on the high seas."

At the first international MPA conference, held in Australia at Geelong, Victoria, last month, delegates from 60 countries discussed progress. It made depressing listening. Louisa Wood of the Sea Around Us Project, based at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, presented the first comprehensive global data on MPAs. In 2003, the 5th World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa, organised by the World Conservation Union, set a target of protecting 20 to 30 per cent of the world's marine habitats by 2012. Wood reported that the 5000 or so MPAs protect only 0.5 to 1 per cent of marine habitats. At this rate of progress, even the 20 per cent target will not be achieved until 2085.

The second report, commissioned by the Australian government, the International Transport Workers' Federation and WWF International, gives a tantalising insight into illegal fishing on the high seas. Though details are murky, it is clear that this is a big business, turning over an estimated \$1.2 billion annually.

The report, co-authored by Netherlands-based fisheries consultants Matthew Gianni and Walt Simpson, lays bare precisely where these companies and individuals are based. By trawling through Lloyd's Register of Ships in London, the repository for information about the world's shipping, Gianni was able to identify around 2800 vessels, accounting for some 15 per cent of the world's large-scale fishing fleet, that are operating under a flag of convenience (FOC) or listed as flag "unknown". FOCs represent a loophole in international law that allows a ship owner to pay a few hundred dollars to register a vessel in a country that does not enforce international maritime law strictly. Some FOC countries do not even have a coastline.

Many nations have significant economic interests in illegal fishing through companies and citizens who operate ships flying FOCs. Taiwan tops the list, and Spain is in fourth place (see Diagram) despite the European Union having signed up in 2001 to a UN plan that requires governments to act against any of their citizens involved in illegal fishing. Signatories are also committed to improve monitoring of vessels, and not to flag a vessel found to have been involved in illegal fishing. "These are states generally considered to be responsible in terms of action to regulate fishing on the high seas," says Gianni. "Yet companies within their jurisdiction own and operate vessels fishing illegally with impunity."

Kelly Rigg an expert on illegal fishing with the Varda Group, a Netherlands-based environmental consultancy, agrees that governments have done little to curb illegal fishing. "From what I can see there is little will among governments to do more than continue to issue statements calling on states to act."

Fernando Curcio, the general director for fisheries resources at the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries says his government is committed to curbing illegal fishing by its nationals. But he says that tracking down offenders is difficult. "What can you do against a national who is located in a tax haven like Vanuatu or the Cayman Islands?" he says. Also, vessels can change their FOC or name or company location in 24 hours, making them even harder to track down, he says.

Figures from Gianni's report herald a shift from using older vessels to building new craft specifically for illegal fishing. Of the 51 fishing boats over 24 metres built in Taiwan between 2001 and 2003, 50 ended up registered in FOC countries, and worldwide more than 100 large-scale fishing vessels built since 2000 were immediately registered in FOC countries. "The fact that new boats are being specially built for illegal activity demonstrates the absolutely critical need for something to be done," says Australian fisheries minister Ian Macdonald. He believes the FOC system must be eliminated. "FOC nations - generally small or third-world countries - get a few hundred dollars for the licence, yet they are giving unscrupulous fishing organisations a ticket for more than a billion dollars of illegal fishing a year."

But that will be difficult, given the lack of any universally accepted definition of an FOC, says Vincent Bantz, an expert in the law of the sea at the University of Queensland, in Brisbane, Australia. He suggests that there should be stronger enforcement of the duty of flag states to control and monitor their vessels under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

He is also hopeful that more radical reforms may be on the way, such as a global fisheries management organisation that would manage fish stocks on the high seas. "This organisation might also flag fishing vessels itself," he says, "That is possible - but it's not going to happen any time soon."

In-depth accounting

To protect marine life effectively, policy-makers need to know exactly what's out there, and where. Gathering this information is the ambitious goal of the Census of Marine Life (CoML), a 10-year

project based in Washington DC that began in 2000.

Now at its halfway point, the census involves 1700 scientists from 73 nations working on 17 different projects. They have created more than 50 linked databases containing 5 million records on the distribution of 40,000 marine species. For example, there are maps of the distribution of more than 400 species of stony coral. And new species are rapidly being discovered by the project, with the tally of new marine fish increasing at the rate of at least two a week. In March, a CoML team reported the discovery of an entirely new family, genus and species, of sea-floor worm, named *Torquarator bullocki*.

One of the projects, called Tagging of Pacific Pelagics, focuses on the open ocean ecosystem from the perspective of large predators. More than 2000 animals from 21 different species, including sharks, turtles and tuna, have been tagged so far and are being tracked. "Ultimately we can see where the niches of these species overlap," says Kristen Yarincik, of CoML. "That is important for identifying potential areas for protection."

The CoML researchers aim to expand the 14 global-scale projects. But first they will have to figure out how much global coverage is needed for a representative sample. "We know you can't survey the whole ocean in 10 years, but we really would like to be able to draw some global conclusions in our 2010 report," Yarincik says.

Emma Young

Related Articles

[Big ideas: Climate change](#)

<http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=mg18725172.100>

17 September 2005

[Let the big fish go to save the species](#)

<http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7579>

26 June 2005

[Marine census reveals depth of ignorance](#)

<http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=mg18024191.700>

01 November 2003

Weblinks

[Marine Protected Areas conference](#)

<http://impacongress.org/>

[Gilly Llewellyn, WWF](#)

http://www.worldwildlife.org/science/staff/gilly_l.cfm

[Sea Around Us Project](#)

<http://www.seaaroundus.org/project.htm>

[Close this window](#)

Printed on Tue Nov 08 20:19:49 GMT 2005