

Fauna / Foreign fishing vessels plunder Namibia's horse mackerel

The country's rich stock is being illegally harvested by foreign-flagged vessels licensed to fish in Angolan waters.

It's past midnight and the officer manning Namibia's fisheries monitoring centre in Walvis Bay notices that a vessel near the Namibia-Angola border has stopped transmitting its location. At the same time, a Namibian fishing vessel's radar detects a foreign vessel notorious for illegal fishing, entering Namibia's waters. Both the officer and the vessel alert the Namibian navy and the fisheries department in Walvis Bay.

Calls to the vessel's flag state remain unanswered, and without a law enforcement vessel located near the Namibia-Angola maritime border, the foreign vessel escapes.

This scenario is not uncommon on the Namibia-Angola border, a fishing industry representative tells ENACT. He says their vessels regularly report suspicious vessels, but no action follows, often due to limited resources.

Although Namibia's waters are rich in valuable fish species, its horse mackerel is the country's biggest fishery by volume. It is also under threat from foreign vessels flying flags of convenience coming from Angola's waters. In 2023, the Confederation of Namibian Fishing Associations [expressed](#) concern, describing how these vessels plunder upwards of a 100 000 tonnes of fish from Namibia's waters annually. This is estimated to result in N\$1.5 billion in annual revenue losses.

The cold Benguela Current hugging Southern Africa's western shores produces prolific fish stocks in countries like Namibia, Angola, and South Africa. Fishing is Namibia's third-biggest gross domestic product contributor, generating N\$10 billion in 2021 and providing around 17 000 direct jobs.

But these lucrative fish stocks, coupled with limited maritime law enforcement presence, border-hopping, and the evasive nature of fishing vessels, attract exploitation.

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The Gulf of Guinea is the global [epicentre](#) of illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing, and experts [warn](#) that fish further south could be targeted as traditionally hit stocks diminish.

This is arguably seen in the illegal fishing of Namibia's horse mackerel. While the species is also fished in Angolan waters, diminishing stocks due to overfishing and illegal fishing by foreign vessels are likely [contributing](#) to its exploitation in Namibian waters.

Foreign vessels are not authorised to fish in Angolan waters. Instead, industrial fishing is done through joint ventures, whereby foreign-flagged vessels are co-owned or leased to Angolan entities. However, some of these are [reportedly](#) front companies, resulting in fishing ventures being *de facto* foreign.

Joint ventures are often seen in developing countries whose domestic fishing industries cannot optimally exploit their own stocks but seek to reap its benefits.

Illegal fishing activity is concentrated in the border region between Angola and Namibia. The foreign vessels are [licensed](#) to fish in Angola, where they are also known to fish illegally and [under-report](#) their catch. In 2022, during a closed fishing season, a Russian trawler belonging to a Chinese company was [seized](#) with 300 tonnes of horse mackerel near Angola's Namibe Province.

The offending vessels fly flags of convenience, often from [Cameroon](#). This is a popular practice for fishing vessels looking to evade accountability. Their true ownership is also obscured by complex company structures, another way to avoid accountability.

SADC Atlantic has facilitated communication channels to identify, monitor and share information about suspicious vessels

Investigations suggest that many [Cameroonian-flagged](#) vessels are owned or managed by European [countries](#). Fisheries experts tell ENACT that these often have Russian and Ukrainian crews, some of whom were previously operating legal fishing vessels in Namibia. Cameroon is also a popular flag for Russian vessels evading international [sanctions](#).

These vessels switch off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) shortly before crossing the Angola-Namibian border, often fishing close to shore and at night, and reactivate their AIS after crossing back into Angolan waters or when entering Angolan ports. The catch is illegally [transhipped](#) in Angolan waters, to avoid entering ports where it can be identified. Fisheries experts tell ENACT that most of the catch is destined for countries across Southern, Central and West Africa.

Fisheries experts say while some of these vessels have been fined or banned from operating in Angolan waters, Angola's government hasn't yet acted decisively against the reoffending vessels – despite South African and Namibian requests for investigations. After being increasingly denied port access by Namibia, these vessels are known to dock in Cape Town to resupply, refuel or change crews – without any catch aboard, leaving South African fisheries inspectors struggling to gather sufficient evidence of IUU fishing to ensure a prosecution.

Despite isolated [interdictions](#) and denying port entry, Namibia has had limited success in apprehending and prosecuting these vessels. Its closest naval base lies too far south, and although its fisheries law enforcement effort is concentrated largely on the northern border, no suspicious vessels have recently been apprehended and prosecuted in Namibia.

Apprehending foreign fleets engaged in cross-border IUU fishing is a global challenge, with many IUU fishing vessels remaining out at sea for extended periods. This helps avoid law enforcement, but also endangers crew members, who are often victims of labour abuses. Along with its sister ship, a Namibian-flagged tuna longline vessel [intercepted](#) with shark fins in 2022 was also investigated for suspected human trafficking of crew members. The vessel was linked to Taiwan and carried crew from multiple countries.

This case illustrates the difficulties of attributing responsibility when a vessel is registered in one country, owned by a company from another jurisdiction, and carrying crew from across the globe. It also shows the potential pitfalls of failing to identify [beneficial](#) ownership, and doing a risk assessment before flagging a vessel or issuing fishing licences.

Namibia, Angola and South Africa are increasingly cooperating to piece together sufficient evidence of illegal activity

Large-scale fisheries crime is not limited to at-sea activity or plummeting fish populations. It impacts national economies and those relying on fishing for livelihoods, and it breeds corruption. This was best illustrated in the [Fishrot](#) scandal, where the lucrative nature of horse mackerel drove Namibian ministers and Samherji, Iceland's biggest fishing corporation, to unduly benefit from the industry from the comfort of their boardrooms. High-profile Angolans also potentially [benefited](#) from the scheme.

There is cause for hope, though. The recently established Southern African Development Community (SADC) Atlantic Project aims to facilitate cross-border cooperation to address IUU fishing activity and related offences in Namibia, Angola and South Africa. This is a practical manifestation of the 2009 Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA), which was established to enable cross-border cooperation to combat IUU fishing.

The PSMA aims to encourage member states to share information and deny port access to vessels suspected of IUU fishing, thereby denying entry to a range of ports or an entire region. SADC Atlantic has facilitated communication channels to identify, monitor and share information about suspicious vessels.

It has developed a risk register to help countries identify previous suspicious activity before vessels request to enter ports. As a result, Namibia, Angola and South Africa are increasingly cooperating to piece together sufficient evidence of illegal activity to stop these Angolan-licensed, foreign-flagged vessels from operating with impunity.

This cooperation will hopefully result in sufficient evidence to build bullet-proof prosecutions and justify denying port access, discouraging vessels from operating in the region's waters.

To reach its full potential, this cooperation must be complemented by increased law enforcement capacity at sea, states refusing to flag or give fishing licences to suspicious vessels, and the development of policies and practices related to disclosing vessel ownership to ensure accountability.

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Image: [NOAA Fisheries](#)