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How to tackle the rising tide of poaching in Australia's tropical seas

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Recommended Citation

Purcell, Steven W. and Eriksson, Hampus B., "How to tackle the rising tide of poaching in Australia's tropical seas" (2016). *Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health - Papers: part A*. 4271.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/smhpapers/4271>

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How to tackle the rising tide of poaching in Australia's tropical seas

Abstract

High-value marine species in waters off northern Australia are at increasing risk of poaching by foreign fishing crews, according to figures from the Australian Fisheries Management Authority. The number of foreign fishing boats caught in Australian waters increased from six in 2014-15 to 20 in 2015-16. These fishers have evidently come to poach species that fetch high prices and have been overfished elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region. They seek "lootable resources" - species that are attractive to the black market because they are expensive, easy to catch and weakly regulated.

Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Purcell, S. W. & Eriksson, H. B. (2016). How to tackle the rising tide of poaching in Australia's tropical seas. *The Conversation*, December 23 1-4.

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



How to tackle the rising tide of poaching in Australia's tropical seas

December 23, 2016 6.10am AEDT

Giant clam shells seized by authorities in waters off Australia's north. NT government

High-value marine species in waters off northern Australia are at increasing risk of poaching by foreign fishing crews, according to figures from the Australian Fisheries Management Authority. The number of foreign fishing boats caught in Australian waters increased from six in 2014–15 to 20 in 2015–16.

These fishers have evidently come to poach species that fetch high prices and have been overfished elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region. They seek “lootable resources” – species that are attractive to the black market because they are expensive, easy to catch and weakly regulated.

Among the species being targeted are sea cucumbers, giant clams, turtles and sharks (specifically their fins).

Many of these species are listed as vulnerable or endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Some are even protected from trade by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

A long history of poaching

The apprehended vessels have been primarily from Vietnam and Indonesia. Last month, a Vietnamese fishing vessel stopped inside the Conservation Park Zone of the Coral Sea Commonwealth Marine Reserve was found to be carrying 3 tonnes of partially processed sea cucumbers. Dried sea

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cucumber, called *bêche-de-mer*, can fetch more than A\$300 per kg when sold in China.



Sea cucumbers and shark fins on sale in Hong Kong. Steven Purcell, Author provided

The Timor and Arafura Seas have long histories of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing due to regional fishery expansion and displacement. Some scientists believe the tensions in the South China Sea are pushing Southeast Asian fishermen into Australian waters. It is also possible that Indonesia's stricter fisheries policy is shifting fishing patterns in the region.

But apart from economic loss as resources are poached from Australian waters, what are the impacts? A new review shows that species such as sea cucumber can play crucial roles in boosting the health of coral reef systems. This is important at a time when reefs are facing intense stress from climate change and coastal development.

Nine species of sea cucumbers from Australian waters were recently declared threatened with extinction globally by the IUCN. Removal of some marine fauna might degrade the resilience of coral reef ecosystems to broad-scale stressors.

What can be done?

In June, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton said: "Preventing illegal fishers from plundering Australia's well-managed fisheries is every bit as important as stopping the people smugglers and illegal arrivals."

Although the Australian Border Force has the capacity to apprehend illegal fishing boats, much of the

poaching happens on distant coral reefs. One problem is that illegal fishing boats can plunder lootable resources and get out of Australian waters before Border Force can reach them. So while regulation might be well enforced on reefs within the Great Barrier Reef, for instance, offshore reefs are comparably weakly regulated.




A Vietnamese boat apprehended in Australian waters in September, carrying an allegedly illegal haul of sea cucumbers. AAP Image/Department of Immigration and Border Protection

But stronger monitoring and enforcement might not be the only solution anyway. My team's research, which involved interviewing sea cucumber fishers from Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga and New Caledonia, suggests that they see themselves as having few other livelihood options besides fishing. This means that even if their fishery collapsed or was closed down by authorities, they would simply move elsewhere or fish a different species.

Many fishers from Southeast Asia have doubtless been lured to poaching in Australian waters by similar issues. Curbing the rise in poaching therefore requires not only continued enforcement but also, crucially, foreign aid investment that can help these fishers to diversify their livelihoods.

Australia recently reshaped its foreign aid policy to focus predominantly on delivering "economic growth and poverty reduction". Organisations such as the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) are investing in overseas research and development projects to provide more income-generating opportunities in fisheries and aquaculture. Support to Southeast Asian countries makes up 49% of the budget for fisheries and aquaculture projects.

Australia's approach to reducing poaching of threatened resources should therefore be multifaceted. Helping foreign fishers deal with their own problems of overfishing by giving them more options to earn a living will ultimately help to tackle the root cause of marine poaching.

 **Fisheries** **Asia Pacific** **Marine conservation** **Poaching** **Customs** **Southeast Asia** **fisheries crime**
Fisheries management