

Criminal catches:

How to stop the supply of illegal seafood to the UK

The Coalition for Fisheries Transparency is calling on the UK to fully implement the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency to address illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and human rights abuses in the fisheries sector. The Coalition's report, *Criminal catches: How to stop the supply of illegal seafood to the UK*, provides detailed evidence on the problems in British seafood supply chains and clear recommendations to address them.

Coalition for Fisheries Transparency



What is IUU fishing?

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing describes any fishing activities conducted in breach of national, regional, or international rules or obligations. It includes fishing without a licence, under-reporting catch, catching prohibited species, operating with illegal fishing gear, or fishing in marine protected areas or areas reserved for small-scale fishers. Unregulated fishing takes place in areas where no management or conservation measures are in place.

IUU fishing is a significant global challenge – an estimated 11-26 million tonnes of illegally or unreported fish worth between US\$10-23.5 billion is caught each year. The UK is not immune: IUU fishing affects both domestic waters and its seafood supply chains.

What we know about the impact of illegal fishing:

- It **worsens overfishing** – depleting fish populations and undermining a critical food source for billions of people, especially in the Global South – typically driven by distant-water fleets from wealthier nations.
- It is frequently linked to **severe human rights abuses**, particularly against migrant workers subjected to forced, bonded and slave labour and trafficking.
- It often **includes the targeting of protected species** – such as false killer whales, sea turtles, rays and dolphins.
- It often **involves the cruel practice of shark finning** – including of endangered shark species such as scalloped hammerheads, oceanic white tips and short finned makos.

About the *Criminal catches* report

The report's extensive analysis highlights the vulnerability of the UK market to seafood tainted by illegal fishing and human rights abuses. It finds that significant quantities of high-risk seafood are being imported from China, Russia and yellow-carded countries (countries that have been officially warned by the EU for insufficient action to combat IUU fishing), and that verification checks at the UK border have declined to alarmingly-low levels – particularly since Brexit.

What is a catch certificate verification?

A process carried out by authorities in the importing country to confirm that imported seafood was caught legally. This includes screening documentation, such as the catch certificate, and making enquiries with relevant authorities – for example, the flag state (the country whose vessel caught the fish) or the state where the fish was processed – to verify the information.



The report's key findings:

- In 2024, more than a quarter of UK seafood imports came from countries that had been yellow-carded, or that were ranked among the top five countries globally for IUU fishing risk.
- The UK receives around 1,000 catch certificates (~58,000 tonnes of seafood) per year from China, yet has only refused four Chinese consignments since 2012.
- Between 2021 and 2023, the UK did not verify or refuse a single catch certificate originating from Russia.
- Between 2022 and 2023, Spain verified over 18 times as many catch certificates as the UK, despite historically receiving only around twice as many catch certificates.
- Since Brexit, verifications have declined threefold and much of the capacity for reporting, coordination and oversight of implementation of IUU import controls in the UK has also been lost.

What is the impact of weak enforcement of the UK's IUU import controls?



UK consumers are likely to be unwittingly consuming seafood tainted by illegal fishing and human rights abuses.



Law-abiding fishers risk being undercut by illegal, imported seafood as they compete to sell produce on the UK market.

The report's 14 key recommendations outline how the UK can strengthen its import controls to combat illegal fishing and prevent illegally caught seafood from entering the UK. They are condensed and summarised below.

The UK should:

- **Fully implement the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency** for the UK to become a leader in transparency and accountability in global fisheries governance and management.
- **Update and digitise its catch certificate in line with other key seafood markets** – this will strengthen authorities' ability to identify and block illicit consignments.
- **Include labour-specific risk information on its catch certificate** such as duration a vessel spent at sea, crew access to Wi-Fi, and the number of trans-shipments. These are strong indicators of risk of forced labour and trafficking of crew.
- **Implement a risk-based approach to identify consignments for further scrutiny** at the border. At present, UK authorities have no standardised approach to this.
- **Significantly increase the number of verifications of catch certificates** and, where necessary, refusals of seafood consignments. Report on progress, as previously done within the EU.
- **Operationalise a carding system involving yellow and red cards to warn and sanction states with poor records on IUU fishing** to drive positive reforms in the UK's seafood supplying states.

Scan the QR Code, or [click this link](#), to access the full *Criminal catches: How to stop the supply of illegal seafood to the UK* report and film.



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