

ILLICIT FISHING: PERSPECTIVE OF FILIPINO FISHERMEN

Archel John M. Lariosa¹

¹University of South Eastern Philippines, College of Development Management, Graduate School Program, Mintal Campus, Davao City, Davao del Sur, Philippines, 8000

ABSTRACT

Illicit, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing remains a significant challenge in the Philippines despite improving the country's illegal index fishing. This research explores Filipino fishermen's perspectives on illicit fishing to understand its root causes, effects, and proposed solutions. The study highlights economic pressures, limited access to resources, and lax enforcement as key drivers of illicit fishing, exacerbating ecological degradation and socio-economic disparities in coastal areas. Comprehensive strategies are required to address this issue, including legislative interventions, enforcement measures, and support for sustainable livelihoods. This research provides valuable insights for policymakers to develop targeted initiatives to combat IUU fishing and promote ethical fisheries management in the Philippines.

Keywords: Illicit fishing, IUU, cyanide, Muro-Ami, and Dynamite.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a country rich in marine resources, the Philippines regularly faces illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing cases. IUU methods such as overfishing pose a grave threat to the country's marine biodiversity as it reduces the volume and quality of our marine livestock (Mendoza, 2023). Based on the "Poseidon Aquatic Resource Management Ltd. And the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime," Philippines improved in the illegal fishing index, where the Philippines ranks 21st out of 152 countries (from worst to best) with a score of 2.35 out of 5 in the 2023 edition biennial illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing index. The index assesses a country's vulnerability, prevalence, and response to IUU fishing. The country scored worse than the global average of 2.28 but still better than the Asian average of 2.51 (Catilogo, 2024). In insurgency of the government's tried to fight this issue, illicit fishing continuously jeopardizes the ecological aquatic environment and the source of income from the coastal communities. Although the government is putting more effort into dealing with illicit fishing, there has been a deal with the potential to grasp the approach of poignant Filipino fishermen. The latest research clarifies the reasons and effects of stealthy fishing. Some research delves into the real-life experience, barriers, and perspectives of those who regularly go across the watercourse. By scrutinizing the perspective of Filipino fishermen on illicit fishing, this research aims to fill the ample decisive gap in understanding. It gives more information and functional strategies for ethical fisheries' resources. The importance of this research is to highlight the significance related to illicit fishing, such as the deterioration of the environment, economic damage, and social inequity. The importance of the perspective of Filipino Fishermen is vital for a research method that is sustainable and stable development. This research aims to answer the following questions: (1.) What are Filipino fishermen's perspectives on illicit fishing? Including the causes, effects, and proposed solutions. (2.) How do socio-economic factors, cultural norms, and institutional dynamics shape their attitudes and involvement in these illicit behaviors? (3.) What implications do the perspectives have on legislative interventions, fishing activities, and community-oriented programs to help eradicate illegal fishing in the Philippines?

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives that the study aimed to achieve include exhaustively describing the diverse views of Filipino fishermen on the criminal activities of illicit fishing, such as the root causes of it, the extent and effects on marine ecosystems and incomes for living, as well as perceptions on effective responses. Further, the research wanted to investigate the broader conditioning of the fishing activities, including social, economic, cultural, and institutional trends, to consider all dimensions of the problem. Additionally, the study generates a scientifically sound conclusion and policy recommendation paper grounded in the findings. It postulates developing a multi-level basis for future initiatives, policies, and measures to address the ongoing problem in the Philippines' fisheries.

3. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of Filipino fishermen participating in legal and illegal fishing activities conducted in Malanggas, Zamboanga Sibugay, Mindanao. The research is based on the phenomenological paradigm due to its focus on revealing the experience and perspective of the fisherman (Alvarico, et al., 2021). The specific focus is on the phenomenon as experienced by people. It aims to uncover experiences, motives, and perceptions behind fishermen's participation in illicit fishing and those who operate legally. Participants will be

recruited using purposive selection to ensure that the sample is diverse in terms of perspectives. Specifically, two fishermen operating in illegal fishing and one fisherman who only practices legal fishing methods will be included for comparison purposes. The primary data collection method will be semi-structured interviews focusing on participants' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors concerning fishing practices (DeJonckheere, M. & Vaughn, L, 2019). Specifically, the guide will explore why the interviewees decide to fish illegally, their perceptions of the consequences of their behavior on the oceans' ecosystems and the well-being of people, the difficulties they face, and the possible solutions. The interviews will be conducted in the local dialect to ensure the vendors' comfort and comprehension. Thematic analysis will be used for data analysis, focusing on patterns, themes, and differences within the patterns across the participants' responses. The analysis process will also be iterative, with several rounds of coding and subsequent theme development to grasp all the nuances of the data received (Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2006)

Ethical considerations in this research are crucial, as the study involves sensitive issues of illegal fishing and other problems. All the participants will offer informed consent throughout the study, as they will be informed about the study's purposes, their rights, and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain confidentiality, and the data will be stored securely. Ethical guidelines for research with vulnerable populations will also be followed, and the cultural sensitivities of the Filipino people will be respected. Utilizing the approach to qualitative methods and adhering to ethical standards, this investigation can shed more light on Filipino fishermen's attitudes towards illegal fishing and support proper interventions to ensure the sustainable management of fisheries in Malanggas, Zamboanga Sibugay.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study interviewed three Filipino fishermen from Malanggas, Zamboanga Sibugay, Mindanao, to gain insight into their experiences with legal and illegal fishing practices. All three fishermen have been fishing for over ten years. Two of the fishermen, a father and son duo aged 55 and 26 respectively, were involved in illegal fishing activities, specifically dynamite fishing, cyanide, and Muro-Ami, contributing to the destruction of marine ecological systems. The Philippines Coast Guard caught the father and son duo during an illegal fishing.

"We were fishing that night, and at that time, it was tough to get fish because we did not go with our group to sail and get some fish, so I told my son that we would use dynamite to get more fish (56-year-old fisherman)."

Moreover, that the time the Philippine Coast Guard caught them, and they were sent to jail and spent in prison for almost one year for violating the Republic Act No. 8550 Provision of Section 88 Fishing through explosives, Noxious or Poisonous Substance, and Electricity (Republic Act No 8550, 1998). The third fisherman, aged 40, only practices legal fishing methods for comparison. After listening to the stories of the three fishermen, three main themes emerged from the three fishermen: Economic Pressures and Livelihood Challenges, Environmental Degradation and Resource Depletion, and Challenges and Perspectives on Regulation and Enforcement.

4.1 Economic Pressures and Livelihood Challenges

We encountered diverse perspectives among fishermen regarding their engagement in illegal fishing activities and their perceptions of regulatory measures. One father, deeply entrenched in illegal fishing practices, highlighted the economic hardships fishermen face in his community. He emphasized the intense competition with industrial vessels and the dwindling fish stocks, expressing the immense pressure to provide for his family amidst limited incomes. Reflecting on the decision to resort to illicit methods, he candidly admitted the allure of quick profits amidst lax enforcement, illustrating the complex interplay between economic necessity and regulatory gaps.

He stated, "Our community is under pressure. The sea's industrial vessels are fierce competitors, and the fish are in decline. All the while, our family must live on a small income."

He added, "Participating in illegal fishing does not come easily. The pressures of economics weigh heavily on us, urging desperate measures, control is lax, and illegal methods hold out the hope of quick, high returns."

Conversely, his son, perhaps influenced by witnessing the struggles of illegal fishing firsthand, expressed a desire to explore alternative livelihood options. He acknowledged the difficulties in transitioning from illicit practices, citing limited access to training, resources, and markets as significant barriers. (Willow, B, et al., 2018). His perspective shed light on the challenges faced by those seeking to break the cycle of illegal fishing and embrace sustainable alternatives. He mentioned, "Alternative means of living have been tried but unsuccessful. The lack of access to education, capital, and markets makes breaking away from illegal fishing difficult."

In contrast, another fisherman, devoid of involvement in illegal activities, underscored his commitment to abide by regulations and uphold the sustainability of the fishing industry. He articulated a sense of pride in earning his livelihood legally, emphasizing the importance of preserving fish stocks for future generations. His stance reflected a deep-seated respect for regulatory frameworks and a recognition of the long-term implications of sustainable fishing practices.

He stated, "Economic challenges are indeed present in our fishing community. But I believe in abiding by regulations and preserving fish stocks for future generations."

He added, "Most of my income comes from legal fishing, and I feel proud about it. The future of our industry depends on us having the image of respectable fishermen who abide by the laws."

4.2 Environmental Degradation and Resource Depletion

It becomes evident that the marine environment and fish populations are undergoing significant changes, posing grave concerns for the long-term sustainability of fishing communities. The observations and concerns expressed by fishermen shed light on the urgent need for conservation efforts and effective management strategies. A 56-year-old fisherman, well-versed in the challenges of marine exploitation, noted the perceptible alterations in the aquatic environment and fish populations over the years.

He remarked, "Over the years, we have witnessed significant changes in the marine environment and fish populations. There has been a noticeable decline in fish stocks, and the marine ecosystem seems increasingly fragile."

His astute observations underscored the adverse effects of overexploitation and environmental degradation on marine biodiversity. Expressing deep apprehensions about the future of fishing in their area, he highlighted the looming threat of irreversible resource depletion. He cautioned, "Long-term sustainability of fishing in our area is a major concern. If we continue down this path of overexploitation and illegal practices, we risk depleting fish stocks to the point of no return."

Conversely, a 40-year-old fisherman, who had steadfastly adhered to legal fishing practices, echoed similar sentiments regarding environmental changes and sustainability concerns—reflecting on his observations.

He remarked, "Over the years, I have observed changes in the marine environment and fish populations. There has been a noticeable decline in certain species, and the overall health of the marine ecosystem seems compromised."

"I am deeply concerned about the long-term sustainability of fishing in our area. Without proper management and enforcement, we risk irreparable harm to the marine environment and jeopardize the future of our industry."

The perspectives of fishermen underscored the pressing need for comprehensive strategies to address environmental degradation and resource depletion in fishing areas. Their insights serve as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness between human activities and the health of marine ecosystems, emphasizing the importance of sustainable practices and collective stewardship for future generations. (National Research Council, 1999).

4.3 Challenges and Perspective on Regulation and Enforcement

A 26-year-old fisherman, intimately familiar with the hurdles of legal fishing, highlighted the bureaucratic red tape, limited access to fishing grounds, and unfair competition from illicit activities that impede their livelihood. His candid remarks shed light on the systemic barriers that hinder compliance with regulations and exacerbate the allure of illegal fishing practices.

He stated, "When attempting to fish legally, we often encounter challenges such as bureaucratic red tape, limited access to fishing grounds, and unfair competition from those engaging in illicit activities."

The 56-year-old fisherman added, "That is why we do more on illegal fishing. We even tried cyanide and Muro-Ami with our group, but it did not last because we were caught again by the Philippine Coast Guard. So, we are banned from some fishing grounds. If we do it again, we will be penalized for how many years, and we will be fine."

When asked about desired improvements in regulation and enforcement, He expressed,

"I would like to see stricter regulation and enforcement of fishing activities, including harsher penalties for offenders, increased surveillance and monitoring of fishing grounds, and more support for alternative livelihoods to discourage reliance on illegal fishing."

Conversely, a 40-year-old fisherman, committed to abiding by regulations, shared his experiences navigating legal fishing endeavors. Despite encountering occasional obstacles, such as weather conditions and equipment failures, he remained steadfast in adhering to the law.

He stated, "While fishing legally, I have encountered occasional obstacles such as weather conditions or equipment failures. However, I have always strived to abide by regulations and operate within the law."

When asked about acknowledging the existence of corruption within regulatory agencies.

He remarked, "I have not witnessed corruption or bribery related to fishing regulations. However, I am aware that such issues exist and undermine the effectiveness of regulatory measures." He added, "I believe there is room for improvement in regulating and enforcing fishing activities. These include better transparency and accountability in governance, increased support for sustainable fishing practices, and measures to combat corruption within regulatory agencies."

The differences in the research outcomes support that fishing control's challenges are rather complicated initiatives that should not be limited to any single solution. From correcting the systemic flaws to developing optimal governance structures, the research findings suggest that these dual analyses provide supporting data for a multi-faceted approach to a policy involving many stakeholders. (Gezelius, 2008).

5. CONCLUSION

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing is among the greatest threats to the Philippines' rich marine biodiversity and socio-economic stability. Despite the measures taken to address the issue by the government and international organizations, the practice of illicit fishing remains, which endangers the ecological health of aquatic environments and the livelihoods of Filipino coastal communities. This study aimed to analyze Filipino fishermen's perceptions of the problem and determine its causes and solutions. Through conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing the relevant information, I realized that factors such as economic hardships, the lack of access to alternative resources, and insufficient enforcement efforts on the part of relevant regulatory bodies contribute to the prevalence of the problem. For instance, illegal fishing deals with the issue of overfishing, but enforcement in these areas leaves much to be desired. Hence, people still prefer engaging in illicit activities since they have no other choice and cannot make a legal business. Illegal and unreported fishing results from numerous factors, including insufficient capacity, skills, and resources. Moreover, it illustrates the importance of international trade agreements concerning environmental and other issues. Only by coming to a mutual agreement will humanity be able to resolve the problem of illegal fishing. However, those who practiced ethical fishing highlighted the necessity for legislative changes, stricter control, and incentives for legal livelihoods. The key finding is that a comprehensive approach is essential to minimize the problem of illicit fishing in the country. Various laws, community programs, and networking play a critical role in solving the problem of IUU fishing and promoting EHFM. In addition, it can be concluded that Filipino efforts at reducing illegal fishing must consider a mixture of social, economic, cultural, and institutional dimensions to develop strategies that tackle the root causes of these phenomena and capture the best approaches for ensuring the sustainable development of the fishery sector.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Alvarico, et al. (2021). Illegal Fishing: In the Eyes of Filipino Fishermen. Research Gate, 104-111.
- [2] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. American Psychological Association, 77-101.
- [3] Catilogo, M. I. (2024). The Philippines improves in the illegal fishing index—business World.
- [4] DeJonckheere, M. & Vaughn, L. (2019). Semistructured interviewing in primary care research: a balance of relationship and rigor. BMJ Specialist Journals.
- [5] Gezelius, S. S. (2008). The Problem of Implementing Policies for Sustainable Fishing. Research Gate.
- [6] Mendoza, T. (2023). A sea of food: Persisting problems in the fishing sector. The Guidon.
- [7] National Research Council. (1999). Sustaining Marine Fisheries. The National Academies Press.
- [8] Republic Act No 8550. (1998, February 25). Official Gazette. Retrieved from <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1998/02/25/republic-act-no-8550/>
- [9] Willow, B. et al. (2018). Behavior Change Interventions to Reduce Illegal Fishing. Frontiers in Marine Science