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Catalyzing the Growth of Electronic Monitoring in Fisheries: Labor Standards

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Background on Electronic Monitoring

Every day, millions of fishing vessels ply the oceans to harvest seafood that helps feed the world's almost 8 billion people. The enormous challenge of protecting the productivity of the oceans while also safeguarding the livelihoods of the millions of people who work along the seafood value chain through traditional tools of data collection can be expensive and imprecise. The result is annual losses of $83 billion USD in global fisheries from insufficient management, accompanied by a gradual decline in the health of fish stocks and the marine environment.[1]

Electronic Monitoring (EM) can provide the detailed information fishery managers need to solve their data and compliance challenges. EM uses an integrated system of on-board cameras and sensors that record fishing activity and extract data. This powerful tool can enable more targeted, cost-efficient management strategies and create opportunities for seafood industry stakeholders to drive improvements in their operations and demonstrate legality and sustainability to the seafood marketplace.[2]

EM's Capability to Monitor Labor Practices

Labor abuses and modern slavery are serious concerns in the global fishing sector. In the last few years, a series of investigations and exposés have brought to light issues such as inhumane work schedules, gross underpayment or forced labor, confiscation of documents, lack of decent food and clean water, unsanitary and unsafe working conditions, physical and verbal abuse, lack of medical care, and even murder at sea.[3,4,5] Fisheries observers have also been subject to mistreatment and violence at sea (Box 1).[6] Given the general environment of lawlessness, poor regulation, and lack of control and enforcement at sea, some operators have resorted to these abuses to maintain the viability of their fishing operations. This problem is only exacerbated by overharvesting of fish stocks, which forces vessels to go further afield and on longer trips in search of fish, putting even more pressure on the economics of the catch sector.[7]

1. World Bank Group, "The Sunken Billions Revisited: Progress and Challenges in Global Marine Fisheries," 2017, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/24056/9781464809194.pdf
2. Philip Christiani et al., "Precision Fisheries: Navigating a Sea of Troubles with Advanced Analytics" (McKinsey & Company, 2019), https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Industries/Agriculture/Our%20Insights/Precision%20fisheries%20Navigating%20a%20sea%20of%20troubles%20with%20advanced%20analytics/Precision-fisheries-Navigating-a-sea-of-troubles-with-advanced-analytics-vF.ashx
3. Associated Press, "Seafood from Slaves," 2016, http://www.ap.org/explore/seafood-from-slaves/
4. Margie Mason, "Myanmar Fisherman Goes Home after 22 Years as a Slave," July 1, 2015, http://www.ap.org/explore/seafood-from-slaves/myanmar-fisherman-goes-home-after-22-years-as-a-slave.html
5. Supang Chantavanich, Samarn Laodumrongchai, and Christina Stringer, "Under the Shadow: Forced Labour among Sea Fishers in Thailand," Marine Policy 68 (June 2016): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2015.12.015
6. Aaron Orlowski. "Kiribati fishery observer dies at sea in the South Pacific." Seafood Source, April 14, 2020, https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/kiribati-fishery-observer-dies-at-sea-in-the-south-pacific
7. Ibid.

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There are also more routine elements of good labor practices, such as adherence to safety protocols, which are sporadically monitored and enforced in almost all fisheries. This should be of interest to insurers and vessel owners alike who are seeking to increase confidence that rules are being followed and reduce the risk of false claims.

EM could be well-suited for monitoring labor practices at sea. While interest in EM for this purpose has grown, it has yet to be demonstrated on-the-water. In the past couple of years, the dialogue has expanded between environmental and human rights organizations, which has been a learning process for all involved. There has also been increasing dialog within national fishing authorities and regional bodies, such as the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). However, there have been clear signs of progress towards using EM for labor monitoring purposes. The dialog is also opening to other important stakeholders, such as the Seafarer's International Union, that understand fisheries and have a deep interest in labor issues. These new voices are helping build a broader and more sophisticated understanding of the issues at play and how to move forward.

In response to the concerns around labor practices in seafood supply chains, many of the world's largest retailers and seafood companies are working to solve the problem. The Seafood Task Force, whose membership includes many of the largest retailers in the EU and US and their seafood suppliers, is an example of industry action to address labor issues. The Task Force put forth a Code of Conduct and Vessel Auditable Standards at the end of 2018.[8] The code covers 15 elements and the associated standards are intended to determine compliance with the code through audits or other activities. Audits will be sufficient for some elements, but other parts of the code play out on the water and will require on-board monitoring to have confidence that standards are being met.

Funders are also paying attention to this issue. For example, FishWise received funding from the Walmart Foundation in 2020 to ramp up their work on improving labor conditions at sea.[9] In 2019, FishWise released guidance on vessel transparency for seafood companies, which highlighted EM as one of the initiatives that companies could leverage to increase transparency and accountability in their supply chains.[10]

With increasing focus on eliminating human labor abuses in seafood supply chains, we anticipate that this dialog and work will point toward applying EM to monitor labor practices on high-risk vessels. At the same time, there will need to be more work to ensure that monitoring does not put the people it is meant to protect at additional risk.

BOX 1

Structural Issues of Having Observers On Board Vessels

The dynamics of having human observers at sea collecting data on fishing operations can be problematic. Far from shore, observers are vulnerable to pressure, bribery, and abuse from the crew of the operation they are supposed to be monitoring. It is this very reason that observers are typically not used for compliance functions. Even so, cases of mistreatment, abuse, and even murder are not uncommon. In April 2020, a Kiribati fishery observer was found dead on a Taiwanese fishing vessel with a massive head wound and bruising.

Observers carry out dangerous work on fishing vessels and it is our obligation to ensure that they are protected. EM offers one way of ensuring their protection given the power dynamics and lack of oversight at sea. EM can remove observers from these dangerous situations or be a deterrent to abuse at sea.

Onboard fisheries observer. Photo: NOAA

8. Seafood Task Force, "Vessel Auditable Standards," 2018, https://www.seafoodtaskforce.global/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/STF_Code-of-Conduct-and-Vessel-Auditable-Standards-V.2_20181212.pdf
9. Ned Daly, "With Support of Walmart Foundation, FishWise Increases Focus on Human Rights in Seafood," SeafoodSource, February 6, 2020, https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/with-support-of-walmart-foundation-fishwise-increases-focus-on-human-rights-in-seafood
10. FishWise, "2019 Open Water Guidance on Vessel Transparency for Seafood Companies," 2019, https://fishwise.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FishWise_VesselTransReport2019-02.pdf