

# Impacts of Lockdowns on Livelihoods of Small-scale Fishers: boon or bane?

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In an attempt to arrest the spread of the novel coronavirus, the Philippine Government began 15 March 2020 lockdown measures in the whole country by putting many provinces in a state of “community quarantine.” This move involved a ban on land, air, and sea travel in and out of the country. While the lockdown was intended for one month only, this was extended based on the recommendation of the country’s Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases. The lockdown covered all domestic movements, including fishing activities. Until now, lockdowns continued but in varying degrees of coverage, nature, and duration, a move that impacted the fisheries sector, particularly small-scale fisheries. In neighboring Indonesia, local quarantines started in March 2020 and it limited the movement of people. At the end of Ramadan in late May, the government allowed air, land, and sea travel provided people follow “health protocols” as people moved from the capital city of Jakarta go home to the provinces. After the holidays, the country again imposed lockdowns and restricted the movements of people, including fisheries-related activities. The impacts of the government-imposed lockdowns on the fisheries sector of two major fishing nations of Southeast Asia, whether positive or negative, were compiled by Mongabay correspondents from the Philippines and Indonesia.

production, especially during the past five years, *i.e.* from 2014 to 2018. Specifically in 2018, Indonesia contributed the highest production volume accounting for more than 49 % of the total fisheries production in the region while the Philippines contributed about 10 % (Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, 2020). In terms of value, Indonesia also contributed the highest at almost 60 %, while the Philippines provided about 10 %, as shown in the following **Table**. However, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in lockdowns in many countries in Southeast Asia, severely affecting the region’s economic sectors including fisheries, and especially hitting hard the small-scale fisheries (FAO, 2021).

## Illegal fishing on the rise

Under the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998, *municipal waters include not only streams, lakes, inland bodies of water and tidal waters within the municipality which are not included within the protected areas as defined under Republic Act No. 7586 (The NIPAS Law), public forest, timber lands, forest reserves or fishery reserves, but also marine waters included between two (2) lines drawn perpendicular to the general coastline from points where the boundary lines of the municipality touch the sea at low tide and a third line parallel with the general coastline including offshore islands and fifteen (15) kilometers from such coastline*. This coastal band is restricted to small-scale fishing, to protect the coral reefs and marine habitats that thrive there. In 2015, the Philippine Government-issued legislation mandating the use of the

The Philippines and Indonesia are among the major fish-producing countries in Southeast Asia. Statistical data and information have shown that these countries have significant contributions to the region’s total fisheries

Table. Fisheries production of Indonesia and Philippines in 2014-2018 by quantity (million t) and value (USD billion) (SEAFDEC, 2020; FAO, 2020)

	Quantity (million t)					Value (USD billion)				
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>Indonesia</b>										
Marine capture fisheries	6.0	6.1	6.1	6.3	6.6	8.0	8.0	8.4	13.2	17.6
Inland capture fisheries	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	1.1	1.2
Aquaculture	14.2	15.6	16.7	16.1	15.8	9.5	8.8	10.3	14.0	12.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>22.2</b>	<b>23.2</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>23.0</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>31.0</b>
<b>Philippines</b>										
Marine capture fisheries	2.1	2.1	2.0	1.9	2.2	2.8	2.7	2.4	2.4	2.6
Inland capture fisheries	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Aquaculture	2.4	2.4	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.1	2.2	2.0	2.0	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>4.9</b>
<b>Fisheries production: Southeast Asia</b>	<b>42.1</b>	<b>44.9</b>	<b>45.3</b>	<b>45.5</b>	<b>46.5</b>	<b>42.7</b>	<b>38.8</b>	<b>41.2</b>	<b>50.6</b>	<b>51.8</b>
<b>Fisheries production: World</b>	<b>191.1</b>	<b>196.6</b>	<b>198.9</b>	<b>206.4</b>	<b>211.9</b>	-	-	-	-	-

tracking devices on commercial fishing vessels although its implementation continues to be delayed amid opposition from the industry.

The months of March to May are prime fishing season in the Philippines, ahead of the start of the monsoon in July when sailing conditions become difficult. In 2020, the fishing period coincided with the lockdown imposed by the Philippine Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, running from March 17 until May 15, during which all land, sea, and air travel was shut down. During the country's lockdown period, the satellite tracking data have shown that illegal fishing appeared to spike as commercial fishers took advantage of reduced patrols to ply coastal waters that they are prohibited from fishing in. In fact, the satellite data indicated a spike in the number of commercial fishing vessels operating in waters within 15 km of the Philippine coast — a zone that is off-limits for commercial fishing. The increase coincided with the peak fishing season and the imposition of a lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic when deployment of marine patrols was reduced due to the lockdowns.

The lockdowns, therefore, did not stop illegal fishing, according to aggregated data from Karagatan Patrol (karagatan means sea), an online reporting platform that is a collaborative effort between the nonprofit group Oceana Philippines and the Philippine League of Municipalities, to counter illegal fishing. The Karagatan Patrol tracks vessels through the visible infrared imaging radiometer suite (VIIRS), a satellite-based tool that detects the high-radiance luring lights used by commercial fishing vessels. On the other hand, most small-scale fishers use underequipped boats with lights that are not powerful enough to be detected by the VIIRS. While VIIRS detection did not automatically mean the presence of illegal fishing activity, the key factor was where the light sources occurred, considering that in the Philippines, commercial fishing is not permitted within 15 km of the coast. These areas, defined as municipal waters, are restricted to small-scale fishing, to protect the coral reefs and marine habitats that thrive there.

In February 2020, before the lockdown began, the VIIRS data showed 3,602 instances of apparent commercial fishing vessels, about 900 per week on average, within municipal waters. In March, when the lockdown was implemented, that number jumped to 5,950, or an average of 1,487 cases a week. In April, the figure was 4,487 for the month, or 1,121 average weekly cases. The first week of May saw a decline in detections with 309 but the figures jumped to 656 in the second week, 9–15 May. When the lockdown was eased, a total of 1,666 detections were made within the municipal waters in the week of 16–22 May 2020. In an interview with *Ms. Gloria Estenzo Ramos*, Oceana Vice President and Head of Oceana Philippines, she said that the excuse of commercial fishing operators found plying in the municipal waters is that they are hiding from high waves. “In reality, they were fishing in



A school of juvenile bigeye trevally (*Caranx sexfasciatus*) swims in the shallows of Dimakya Island, Palawan, Philippines  
(Photo: Steve De Neef, Greenpeace)

bays and gulfs that are critical marine habitats and destroying the spawning grounds of young fishes,” *Ms. Ramos* stressed.

Oceana Philippines also noted that “only small, artisanal fisherfolk on less than 3 GT fishing vessels with passive fishing gears are allowed” to fish in municipal waters. These coastal territories are known as reproduction and spawning grounds for most fish species. Recent records show that the size of wild-caught fishes, like sardines, is shrinking, implying that they are being caught before they can grow big enough to properly reproduce. The VIIRS data from May 2020 detected these vessels within three major protected areas in El Nido-Taytay Managed Natural Resource and Protected Area, and Malampaya Sound Protected Landscape/Seascape, both in Palawan Province; and the Ticao-Burias Pass Protected Seascape, a marine corridor that covers the Provinces of Masbate, Camarines Sur, Albay, and Sorsogon.

Masbate Province, which has 20 coastal municipalities, had the highest number of detections in its municipal waters in May, at 320. Palawan registered 249, while Quezon Province, which faces the Pacific Ocean, had 208. These provinces are prolific sardine producers, together accounting for nearly 11,500 t in 2018, or 13 % of the country's total fisheries production, according to the Fisheries Statistics of the Philippines. *Ms. Ramos* attributed the increase in apparent illegal fishing during the lockdown period to the fact that “some enforcement agencies were diverted to other COVID-19-related tasks.” As a result, illegal fishers took advantage of the lack of monitoring. However, some municipalities in the central Philippines joined forces to “enhance enforcement of fisheries and environmental laws in their municipal waters,” she added.

It is unclear which of the numbers of detected vessels are local and those that are foreign since VIIRS only tracks strong luring lights, Oceana Philippines stated. But the figures underscore

the need for the Philippine Government to implement its vessel monitoring rules, which will require commercial fishers to install tracking devices “that will indicate the identity and specifications of the fishing vessel, aside from their real-time location.” Commercial vessels fishing within municipal waters are a persistent problem in the Philippine fisheries sector, on which 1.9 million people depend for their livelihood, out of whom, around 1.0 million are community fishers from underprivileged communities.

Three-quarters of the country’s waters are considered overfished, and wild-caught fish yields have decreased in recent years, prompting the Philippine Government to impose closed fishing seasons, strengthen the aquaculture sector, and speed up the declaration of marine protected areas. “We cannot allow illegal entry of commercial fishers in municipal waters,” said *Hon. Gerard Montojo*, the Mayor of the island municipality of Romblon. “We need support in monitoring our municipal waters, and the tracking device installed on commercial fishing boats plying our territorial waters is a big help so we can run after them, seize their boats, and arrest them so they are held accountable by the law.” But while legislation mandating the use of these tracking devices has been on the books since 2015, the implementation continues to be delayed, *Ms. Ramos* said. The commercial fishing sector is strongly opposed to the requirement, she said, “but this will not matter” if there is a political will to act.

## Continued safeguarding of the environment

Communities in the biodiversity haven of Palawan Province in the Philippines earn millions in tourism-related services annually, but the industry has been paralyzed due to a lockdown aimed at suppressing the spread of COVID-19. The lockdown, which came into effect on 17 March 2020, has forced to close the tourist sites in the Province, affecting thousands of families dependent on tourism. Despite this, the communities continue to look after their protected areas, making sure that illegal logging and fishing activities do not proliferate during the lockdown period. Nonetheless, with proper handling of finances, the community organizations were able to sustain themselves and the areas they look after for a year, but interventions and support were necessary to keep these areas protected in the long run.

On a sweltering morning in April 2020, Park Manager, *Mr. Jose Mazo*, operates a motorized patrol boat that glides through the turquoise waters of Siete Pecados, a 52-ha marine protected area (MPA) off the town of Coron in northern Palawan. A world-famous tourist destination in the Philippines, Palawan receives more than a million tourists annually. The vibrant coral reefs, part of the country’s total coral reef area spanning 26,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Siete Pecados welcomed 51,000 visitors in 2019 alone.

The months of March up to May are the busiest for Siete Pecados, and the daily monitoring routine was not new to *Mr. Mazo*, who has been at the MPA’s helm for more than 15 years. Except that this time around, not a single tourist had come to snorkel in the park’s municipal waters. Since 17 March 2020, Siete Pecados was temporarily closed to visitors after the national government imposed a lockdown to stem the surge of positive COVID-19 cases in the country.

The closure hurt the economy of the Province, which was largely dependent on tourism. In fact, tourism receipts amounted to PHP 83 billion (USD 1.6 billion) in 2018 alone. “Supposedly, now is the best time for us to earn more,” *Mr. Mazo* said. “But we are forced to close the park, following the government’s community quarantine directive.” The site earned PHP 5.1 million (USD 100,000) from the entrance and environmental fees in 2019 but in 2020, they expected to lose PHP 1.5 million (USD 30,000) for March to May, *Mr. Mazo* declared. But beyond the earnings, the closure has also impacted the 92 members of their association and their families. “Each of them earns at least PHP 8,000–15,000 (USD 160–300) monthly for their outrigger boats that bring tourists to the marine park,” *Mr. Mazo* said. “Now, that sure income is gone.”

Thousands of families who depend on community-based sustainable tourism have been affected by the pandemic and lockdown policy in the Province of Palawan. In the provincial capital Puerto Princesa, some 420 km from Siete Pecados, 400 families work in the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park (PPSRNP), a 22,202-ha UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its 8.2-km underground river, have lost their livelihood. During the prime tourist months, the site hits its daily maximum of 1,200 visitors. In 2019, it earned PHP 108 million (USD 2.1 million) in entrance fees from its 331,356 visitors. “For this peak season, our collective income loss was PHP 6 million or about USD 119,000,” *Ms. Teresita Austria*, a representative of the Boat Owners’ Association said.



During prime tourist months, the Puerto Princesa Underground River easily fills in its 1,200 daily carry-in capacity

(Photo: Haya Benitez)

Like in Siete Pecados' case, the boat operators for PPSRNP have suffered the most, as 314 of them have been left in limbo as their boats laid idle due to the lockdown. They used to earn PHP 10,000–15,000 (USD 200–300) monthly. While the government was expected to ease the lockdown by 1 May 2020, the halt to tourism activities will linger for the duration of the pandemic and cut off the main income source for thousands of tourism-dependent families here, *Mr. Mazo* said. Palawan is considered a low-risk area for COVID-19 infections, but as the pandemic paralyzes Palawan's tourism industry, resilient ecotourism communities embedded in biodiversity hotspots like Siete Pecados and PPSRNP have found sustainable ways to survive through the crisis, all the while not having to abandon their environmental conservation initiatives.

## Monitoring work continues

One morning in April 2020, *Mr. Mazo* and his rangers checked the coral reefs for signs of bleaching and crown of thorns infestation in their MPA. Despite the drastic cut in daily income from tourism, the group continued to regularly patrol the park to ensure that it was free from illegal fishing activities. "Locals lost their tourism jobs due to the lockdown, and there is a possibility that some may turn to illegal fishing," exclaimed *Mr. Mazo*. Even the body that manages the MPA is not immune, as it had to let go of five of its 15 employees, retaining mostly rangers and garbage pickers.

In Siete Pecados, marine species such as the critically endangered hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) thrive alongside 74 species of reef fish, including the endangered humphead wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*). Other species of high conservation value previously seen here are the dugong (*Dugong dugon*), spotted eagle ray (*Aetobatus narinari*), and whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*). Before its designation as an MPA in 2005, Siete Pecados suffered from rampant illegal fishing activities, particularly the heavy use of cyanide, dynamite, and trawling from the 1980s to the late 1990s. This led to widespread coral reef destruction and fish stock depletion. But ecotourism and massive information campaigns halted this, according to *Mr. Mazo*. Coron, which is part of the Calamianes group of islands, is famous for its well-preserved underwater shipwrecks surrounded by coral reefs in good condition. "Since opening this area to tourists in 2004, those damaging activities were stopped and the impending fisheries collapse was averted," said *Mr. Mazo*, who has been at the forefront of mobilizing the community to combat illegal fishing in the area since the early 2000s. "The majority of fishers have migrated to tourism." It is the same in the PPSRNP, where boat operators, organized since 1991, were taking their part in safeguarding their seas. PPSRNP's 7,000-ha marine zone also suffered from the impact of illegal fishing in the 1990s, despite having been declared a protected area since 1971.

"Our task remains the same: report illegal fishers to enforcement authorities," *Ms. Austria* said. "Within our association, as most go back to their fishing job, we discourage them from using banned fishing methods." A model for balancing conservation and sustainable tourism, the national park is home to at least 1,024 terrestrial and marine wildlife species, some of which are endangered, rare, or endemic. But they are more at risk of vanishing if the plunder of habitats driven by food scarcity caused by the pandemic is left unchecked, says PPSRNP protected area superintendent *Ms. Elizabeth Maclang*. Park rangers continue to monitor the forested areas in the park during the lockdown, *Ms. Maclang* added. "The same monitoring is being done in marine zones because we have assumed that some may also engage in destructive fishing," she stated. "We are addressing the locals' needs by distributing relief goods and vegetable seedlings so they can plant and sell for their subsistence."

## Back to basics

For the coastal ecotourism associations in Palawan, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the reset button, pushing them to return to fishing and farming — their bread-and-butter livelihoods prior to the province's tourism boom. "It's kind of going back to basics," *Mr. Mazo*. Locals near Siete Pecados haul in an average daily fish catch of 10 kg each, almost triple the national average of 3.5 kg for small-scale fishers. *Mr. Mazo* attributed the robust fish catch to the declaration of the area as an MPA, which helped them ride through the lockdown. "Imagine if there are no tourism activities during the pandemic and the fish populations are depleted, we would not survive," he added.

"MPAs are there for the long gain," *Dr. Rene Abesamis*, a marine biology expert, declared. Well-managed MPAs serve as safe areas for fish where they spawn and grow and eventually move out, *Dr. Abesamis* said. Combined with sustainable fishing methods outside the MPA, fish biomass improves and marine food security stabilizes. "The biomass that took many years to accrue" inside MPAs, *Dr. Abesamis* warns, can be



Underwater image of Siete Pecados, one of the most well-managed marine protected areas in the Philippines

(Photo: Gerald R. Mondala)

substantially reduced by illegal fishing and poaching activities. That is why “it is really important to continue protecting the protected areas even in trying circumstances like the current pandemic,” he said. “If the communities stop being vigilant, the effect will be very big in the long run.”

Decades of conserving PPSRNP’s vast marine zone have also paid off, yielding bountiful fish harvests for locals in these trying times. “Fishing boats here are brimming that you can buy high-valued fish species like *lapu-lapu* (groupers) for as low as PHP 100 (USD 2) per kilogram,” *Ms. Austria* said, adding that they have asked commercial markets in the city to buy their catch so it would not be spoiled and members will have an alternative cash source. *Ms. Austria* has also rekindled her subsistence organic farm during the lockdown, planting fast-growing vegetables in her 1-ha property located at the foot of the Park’s iconic Karst mountains. “The adjustment is difficult because we were now used to earning more from tourism than farming and fishing combined,” she added.

Tourism’s “easy money” drove numerous locals away from farming and fishing, *Austria* exclaimed. “The pandemic has forced many to realize how equally important those forgotten and underappreciated sectors are, especially now that the tourism industry has slumped.” Community-based tourism has improved the once economically deprived villages in the province, but many believe that regaining the economic momentum remains a challenge in the age of COVID-19. Locals, nonetheless, were hoping against hope that the tourism industry will rebound soon, or at least in time for the next peak season, which begins in the fourth quarter of 2020. If not, they look forward to the same period next year. “Once the situation improves, we expect tourism here to bounce back by 2021,” *Mr. Mazo* said.

While the restrictions continue, *Mr. Mazo* indicated that the management of Siete Pecados has PHP 2 million (USD 40,000) in reserves to support its 10 employees until next year, and another PHP 4 million (USD 80,000) for coastal resources management. But despite this, the situation remained uncertain. The provincial tourism office was preparing a recovery plan to help tourism-dependent workers, but no concrete details have been released as of the time being. “Whether tourists would come back after the Philippine lockdown is lifted, is our concern,” *Mr. Mazo* said, adding that the majority of the site’s foreign visitors came from European countries like Spain and France which are still grappling with the pandemic.

Meanwhile, *Ms. Austria* was pinning her hopes on the discovery of a vaccine for the virus. The Palawan Provincial Office had earlier said that without a vaccine, inbound and outbound travel is banned in the Province. “If we find a cure to coronavirus,” *Ms. Austria* said, “then there is a fighting chance we can revive the dying tourism industry that gives life to everyone here.”

## COVID-19 hits seafood sales

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, measures have also been taken to prop up the declining sales of fish amid a slump in demand caused by the people’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Restaurants and shopping malls have been shut down in most large cities across the country as part of social distancing measures, leading to the decline in demand for seafood. Fish exports have also slowed as Indonesia, like many other countries, has restricted its trade with other affected countries.

At a fishing port in Lamongan, Eastern Java, Indonesia, a fisher *Mr. Muhammad Fauzi* while unloading his catch after spending days out at sea, stated that he still goes fishing even though sales have dropped in the past couple of months due to the novel coronavirus outbreak. “If I do not go, what work will I do? If had a farm, I would rather do that,” *Mr. Fauzi* said in an interview at the port in Lamongan. *Mr. Fauzi* is one of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians whose livelihood depends on fishing. But a string of measures by authorities to curb the spread of COVID-19 has been a blow to many local industries, including fisheries.

In the case of *Mr. Fauzi*, he said he used to earn up to IDR 5 million (USD 300) for 15 days of fishing. Recently, however, he has been making IDR 1.5 million (USD 90) at most, while his expenses remain the same. “So working at sea is almost a waste,” *Mr. Fauzi* declared. Meanwhile, *Ms. Siti Aminah* works at the Lamongan Fish Port sorting the catch that the fishers bring in. She said she hoped the virus would not hit the area, otherwise, authorities would be forced to shut down the port, leaving her out of a job. The ongoing drop in sales has already slashed her daily income by half, she said. “Before the virus outbreak, many tourists came here.”

But as long as no outsiders enter anymore, it should be safe,” *Ms. Siti* said. In the wake of the outbreak, now a global pandemic, Indonesia has followed the steps of other countries around the world to impose travel and trade restrictions in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. Fish exports to China, in particular, have declined significantly. The move has hit the shrimp-fishing community in Sumatra’s Jambi Province, Indonesia which is highly reliant on the Chinese market (Mubarok & Ambari, 2020). Since Indonesia reported its first confirmed COVID-19 infections on 2 March 2020, local governments have restricted travel between provinces and cities. Food shipments were exempted from these restrictions, but demand has gone down with the temporary closure of restaurants and shopping malls.

That has had an impact on fishers in East Java and across the country, said *Mr. Ibrahim*, Head of the Lamongan Port Authority. He said much of the fish being brought in was now piling up in cold storage. Fish exports from the port have dropped by as much as 70 % since February 2020, *Mr. Ibrahim* added. Destination countries include France,



Fishers' catches are piling up in cold storage as demand for seafood slumps amid restaurant closures

(Photo: Falahi Mubarak, Mongabay Indonesia)

Italy, Netherlands, the U.S., Thailand, Taiwan, and China. Fishers from the north coast of Java, an area known as Pantura, have raised concerns about the impact on their industry and communities. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF) has indicated it will make efforts to prop up fish sales and provide fishers with financial aid in the meantime. Among the measures, it was required that cold storage companies take in all the fish brought to port. It was also overseeing the supply of fish pellets and other aquaculture items to fish farmers. "The Indonesian President's message is very clear that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the government must sustain productivity, purchasing power, and food supply," said *Mr. Slamet Soebjakto*, Director of Aquaculture at the MMAF. "Stakeholders need not worry as the MMAF continues to monitor every event in the field and is prepared to be involved at any time," he exclaimed.

## COVID-19 no excuse for dropping guard against illegal fishing

The Indonesian authorities also indicated that they would remain vigilant for illegal fishing practices as poachers and blast fishers anticipate a dip in enforcement activity amid COVID-19 restrictions. Since 1 March 2020, Indonesian authorities have seized 19 foreign fishing vessels which were

not allowed to operate in Indonesian waters, and have also reported a growing number of cases of blast fishing. The MMAF would not drop its guard but had seen its budget for 2020 slashed by more than a quarter as the government reallocated funding for the COVID-19 response. Among the affected programs was the stimulus initiative package to prop up fish sales and provide fishers with financial aid as the health crisis hits seafood sales and demand.

Fishers were taking advantage of a perceived drop in enforcement amid the COVID-19 crisis to operate illegally in Indonesian waters, Indonesian officials stated. Indonesia has since November 2014 banned foreign fishing vessels from operating in its waters, home to some of the world's richest fish stocks. Indonesian fisheries law also bans destructive fishing methods, including the use of explosives and cyanide. But travel bans and other restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have encouraged some fishers to try their luck. "In conditions like these, destructive fishing practices are potentially increasing, and this must remain a concern for all authorities and regional governments," *Mr. Haeru Rahayu*, Director-General of Marine and Fisheries Resources of the MMAF said.

Authorities have seized at least 19 foreign fishing vessels since 1 March 2020, a day before the country reported its first confirmed COVID-19 case. These vessels bore the flags of Viet Nam, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and were caught in separate incidents off North Natuna, in the Sulawesi Sea, and the Malacca Strait. At the same time, the government has also reported a growing number of cases of destructive fishing by local fishers across the archipelago. *Mr. Haeru* said his team had anticipated the "uptick in illegal fishing by foreign vessels" trying to operate under the impression that the COVID-19 measures would result in less maritime vigilance by Indonesian authorities.

"Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the MMAF was absolutely not relaxing its operations to protect the sovereignty of fisheries management in the Republic of Indonesia," *Mr. Haeru* said. "Our monitoring fleets are staying ready in sites that are prone to illegal fishing."



An Indonesian maritime patrol monitors for signs of illegal fishing (left) and a foreign fishing vessel seized for fishing illegally in Indonesian waters (right) (Photo: MMAF Indonesia)

Indonesia's former Minister for the MMAF, *Ms. Susi Pudjiastuti*, who enacted the ban on foreign fishing, gained widespread popularity for a policy of seizing these vessels and later sinking them to create a deterrent effect and prevent their possible reuse for illegal fishing (Kaye, 2015). The policy, though controversial with some of the flag countries of the capsized vessels, was praised by experts and the public at home and abroad, and was considered to have helped replenish fish stocks in Indonesian waters. But law enforcement at sea remains a key challenge for the Southeast Asian nation, whose more than 17,000 islands and the third-longest coastline in the world made it difficult to detect illegal and destructive fishers seizing on blind spots in monitoring. The incumbent Minister for MMAF, *Mr. Edhy Prabowo*, has also been criticized by experts for considering a plan to end the sinking of seized illegal boats (Ambari, 2019).

Marine observers have called on the government to beef up efforts to guard the country's waters and fishery resources from illegal and destructive practices amid the coronavirus crisis. "Generally, an economic crime which is an organized action always looks for that moment when monitoring by state authorities is weak or absent," *Mr. Mas Achmad Santosa*, former coordinator of Indonesia's anti-illegal fishing task force and current Executive Director of the think tank Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative, declared. *Mr. Santosa* urged the MMAF to maintain or, if possible, increase monitoring days by the coast guard from the current 150 days per year, and optimize the use of satellite tracking systems for vessel monitoring, such as automatic identification system (AIS) and vessel monitoring system (VMS). "It is very possible that the budget for maritime monitoring is reduced because the priority is now focused on combating COVID-19," *Mr. Santosa* said. "But I appreciate the MMAF which has seized 19 foreign boats amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows that monitoring is not relaxed."

The MMAF reported on 22 April 2020 that its budget for this year has been slashed by IDR 1.8 trillion (USD 119 million), or more than a quarter, to provide funding for tackling the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. Among the affected programs was a stimulus package to prop up fish sales and provide fishers with financial aid as the health crisis hits seafood sales and demand, and the stimulus has been cut by 17 % or IDR 362 billion (USD 24 million). Activists said that the government should prioritize the social safety net for the 8 million households who depend on fishing for a livelihood (Gokkon *et al.*, 2019).

These activists have called for, among other things, funds to be reallocated from the IDR 9.93 trillion (USD 657 million) budget for the 2020 local elections. "The government must allocate special funds for fishing households whose incomes have dropped due to the COVID-19 outbreak," said *Ms. Susan Herawati*, the Secretary General of the People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice (KIARA), a local NGO.

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## About the Authors

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