

# What is Destructive Fishing?

Drawing on the sectors of fisheries management, small-scale fisheries, seafood corporates, academia and civil society, an ongoing project attempts to define 'destructive fishing'

The language of fisheries, conservation and sustainable development can be fraught with jargon. Of course, aquatic ecosystems are inherently dynamic and fluid; it's easy to see why technical language like 'maximum sustainable yield' and 'adaptive co-management' is needed to rationalize and describe their management and use. Sometimes, the words we use every day in these disciplines can have very different meanings according to the varied cultures, value systems and statuses of the individuals or groups using them. What is 'sustainable'? What is 'unsustainable'? Or, as is the focus of a

To this end, the project intends to use the established Delphi process method, a group opinion technique that aims to capture diverse individual knowledge in order to generate collective wisdom—without the domination of individual views. The method has been used in a variety of environmentally and socially focused consensus-building projects, from helping to identify barriers to effective solid waste management in a 2020 Taiwanese study to summarizing the ecosystem services associated with mangroves in a 2014 global study.

The impetus to undertake this project comes from the recognition that, while the drive towards the 'ecosystem approach to fisheries' is gaining momentum—over three-quarters of FAO Member States and several multilateral Regional Fisheries Bodies have reported that they are implementing it—this approach represents a solution without a clearly-defined problem. 'Destructive fishing' is characterized as the problem that ecosystem-based fisheries management is trying to solve; the hypothesis is that the solution can be tailored by better defining the problem and its scope.

**Only a very small number of fishing gears or fishing methods are recognized as inherently 'destructive' wherever and however they are used, the primary examples being explosives and synthetic toxins.**

new two-year project launched in early 2021, what is 'destructive fishing'?

Obviously, applying the term 'destructive' to an activity, a livelihood or a commercial practice can be politically and socially sensitive; the project is designed to identify common ground and constructively explore areas of divergence. It is led by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and the wider Cambridge Conservation Initiative (CCI). Using a three-stage expert review process, the 'Defining Destructive Fishing' project will seek to explore the level of consensus around the term 'destructive fishing' across representative stakeholders from fisheries management, the small-scale fisheries sector, the corporate seafood sector, academia and civil society.

## Specific examples

Several international policy instruments use the term 'destructive fishing' or synonymic terms. It has been present in recent national policy instruments in various places including Indonesia, Romania, the Maldives and the European Union. The term is also consistently used by media publications—in various languages—to describe in-process, proposed or potential fishery policy changes (for example, in recent United Kingdom coverage of bottom-trawling policy or recent international coverage of Indonesian trawl and seine-net policy).

This article is by **Dan Steadman** ([daniel.steadman@fauna-flora.org](mailto:daniel.steadman@fauna-flora.org)), Fisheries & Biodiversity Technical Specialist, Fauna & Flora International, United Kingdom



A middle-scale bottom-trawler in Cambodia's Koh Sdach archipelago. Applying the term 'destructive' to an activity, a livelihood or a commercial practice can be politically and socially sensitive; the project is designed to identify common ground and constructively explore areas of divergence

There is a range of specificity in these examples in terms of what is within the scope of 'destructive fishing'. From describing fishing gear types or methods that are 'destructive' in all circumstances, to specific spatial, temporal, behavioural or social contexts in which a given practice is described in this way. A prior expert review process in 2009 (conducted by CBD, FAO, UNEP and the IUCN Fisheries Expert Group) defined the term as referring "to the use of fishing gears in ways or in places such that one or more key components of an ecosystem are obliterated, devastated or cease to be able to provide essential ecosystem functions". This review also observed that "few, if any, fisheries are consistently 'destructive'. Only a very small number of fishing gears or fishing methods are recognized as inherently 'destructive' wherever and however they are used, the primary examples being explosives and synthetic toxins".

While the project is deliberately inclusive, consultative and designed to minimize reaching any premeditated conclusions, there are likely to be some areas of contention and debate. There

is a fundamental question over whether 'destructive fishing' is analogous simply to the use of a specific group of fishing methods or the way a given method is deployed on the water (that is, a 'practice'). While for some the scope of FAO's current definition is sufficient, for others its delineation of only explosives and toxin fishing methods as "inherently destructive" may be too narrow, with the potential for other methods and practices to be considered in this category. (Early results of baseline analysis suggest that, for example, bottom-trawling, various fine-mesh-net methods and assisted spear fishing are often broadly referred to as destructive in numerous sources.)

Where the destructive properties of an activity may be characterized as being of multiple vectors—ecological, social and economic—does this compound its risk and, therefore, the urgency of political and corporate response? Finally, if there is a consensus around a practice or method as 'destructive', perhaps the key consideration will be its implications. Do such activities require something more drastic than improved fisheries management?

### Calling *SAMUDRA* Report readers for expert input

During early 2021, members of the project team from the University of Cambridge's Zoology Department collated a baseline of the term 'destructive fishing' in academic literature, policy instruments and the media. This preliminary analysis has enabled us to design and launch the first-stage survey of our expert review process (launched in mid-April 2021), which will remain open until July 2021.


In parallel, other members of the project team from FFI, BirdLife International and UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre have been identifying and reaching out to expert representatives of convening bodies across sectors. (For example, corporate seafood sector alliances, small-scale fishery global representative bodies, and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations, among others.) They seek contributions to the process and invite readers of *SAMUDRA* Report to express their interest in being added to this pool.

The definition of an expert, at this initial stage, is broad and inclusive, applying to anyone with over five years experience in a relevant field. A group of over 20 experts has already been assembled from every continent, mostly from the governmental fisheries management, marine conservation and academia sectors. In particular, they are keen to hear from those engaged in the small-scale fisheries sector itself.

If you would like to learn more about the project or be added to the expert pool, please visit [www.destructivefishing.com](http://www.destructivefishing.com) or contact the author directly.

### Project results

When its results are presented in 2022, the project will hopefully begin to resolve some of the areas of contention and catalyze action at many of the delayed or reorganized global gatherings from what was to be

help governments and corporate actors to prioritize the management of fisheries based on their ecological, social and climatic risk as much as the value and status of fish stocks. 

**...it will nonetheless help governments and corporate actors to prioritize the management of fisheries based on their ecological, social and climatic risk as much as the value and status of fish stocks.**

the 'Ocean Super Year', including the UN Oceans Conference and the FAO Committee on Fisheries. The long-term ambition for the expert review evidence is to support enhanced fisheries decision making at national and international levels, particularly around the need to go 'beyond sustainability'. Although a complex and contentious process, using evidence to consider the extent to which a fishery is destructive, rather than solely the extent to which its focal target species is maximally fished or overfished, will nonetheless

#### For more

#### Defining and Measuring "Destructive Fishing" in Support of Achieving SDG14 – Life Below Water

<https://www.cambridgeconservation.org/project/defining-and-measuring-destructive-fishing-in-support-of-achieving-sdg14-life-below-water/>

#### Call for experts to define destructive fishing

[https://www.cambridgeconservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2021\\_CCI\\_destructive\\_fishing\\_call\\_for\\_experts.pdf](https://www.cambridgeconservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2021_CCI_destructive_fishing_call_for_experts.pdf)