

Search ▾

The  
Guardian

International  
edition ▾

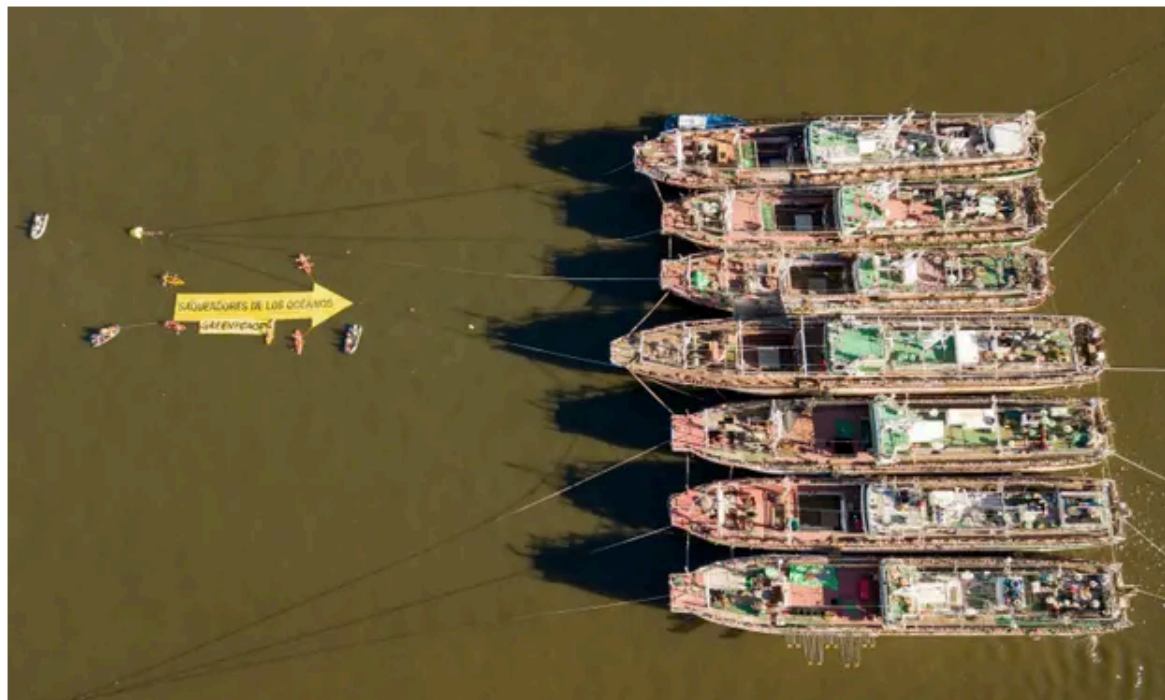
**Jonathan Watts**

🐦 @jonathanwatts

Fri 1 May 2020 00.01 BST

# Stealth plunder of Argentinian waters raises fears over marine monitoring

**Green groups fear coronavirus lockdown has weakened environmental protections**



▲ Greenpeace activists display an arrow that reads 'Looters of the Oceans' pointing to fishing vessels as part of a campaign to denounce destructive fishery activities in the Argentine Sea, in 2019. Greenpeace says the coronavirus pandemic has led to new abuses. Photograph: Greenpeace/AFP via Getty Images

---

An “armada” of more than 100 fishing vessels are illegally plundering south Atlantic waters close to [Argentina](#), environmental groups say, raising concerns that the coronavirus lockdown has weakened already fragile marine protections.

The incursion of the ships, mostly from east Asia, appears to have been carried out by stealth. The vessels waited until nightfall, shut down satellite tracking systems in coordination and then moved into the squid-rich waters of Argentina’s exclusive economic zone, Greenpeace said.

The ships were detected in Mar del Plata on the radar of a legal vessel, which reported the incident to coastguard officials and fishing authorities.

By [one estimate](#), the ships - each capable of taking 50 tonnes per day - could in less than three weeks exceed the Argentinian fleet’s quota for the entire season.

The incident has prompted questions in parliament and underlined how commercial interests are trying to capitalise on the relaxation of environmental monitoring and enforcement during the pandemic.

“Most people think that the global pandemic means that nature is finally having a chance to heal. But this is not what we are seeing in the unregulated waters of the South Atlantic ocean,” said Luisina Vueso, from Greenpeace’s Protect the Oceans campaign.

---

“Just one look at this shocking [radar image](#) shows you that this armada ... is taking advantage of the lack of governance in the high seas to empty our oceans of life.”

Similar concerns have been raised in other areas of the world. In the Amazon, deforestation is accelerating and more illegal miners are invading indigenous territories following the Brazilian government’s admission that it would have fewer rangers on the ground.

On the savannahs of east Africa, conservation groups warn of a [rise](#) in wildlife poaching. And in the US, oil companies have lobbied to develop wells inside national parks and for the criminalisation of pipeline protesters.

The oceans pose an even greater worry, environmental groups say, because even before the pandemic there was very little regulation of fishing and mining in international waters. This is the least patrolled domain in the world. Monitoring has declined further since the Covid-19 outbreak.

This month the marine conservation group Sea Shepherd reluctantly [suspended](#) its campaign to protect

the critically endangered vaquita porpoise in Mexico's Upper Gulf of California because it was unable to secure fuel due to the pandemic.

Industrial tuna fishing companies have persuaded maritime organisations to remove onboard monitors, reduce port inspections and loosen trans-shipment requirements.

The Canadian government has followed several countries in [removing observers](#) from all fishing vessels until the end of May, which means no oversight of what is caught and discarded.

This has alarmed ocean conservationists and some of the more responsible fishing companies. The [International Seafood Sustainability Foundation](#) said the lower level of surveillance would “open the door to increased illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and in doing so could undermine the recovery and resilience of many important fish stocks globally.”

Frédéric Le Manach, the scientific director of [the ocean protection group Bloom Association](#), said fishing fleets around the world were pushing for fewer restraints on their activities, which could have disastrous implications.

“The pandemic is a good excuse for industrial fisheries because without observers you can do exactly what you want,” he said. “But it would be a major mistake to allow weaker regulations at a time of crisis because once you do that it is hard to go back. If anything we need stronger monitoring during this crisis. This could be the moment when we put CCTV cameras onboard every fishing ship. This would be a major step forward.”

**Fishing** fleets are lobbying for weaker rules so they can compete on a level playing field. The nationalist undercurrent was apparent in the UK recently when five European supertrawlers entered British waters. This is legal but it provoked accusations that they were taking advantage of the lockdown, because there were fewer such vessels this time last year.

Vueso said the worsening free-for-all showed the need for a global ocean treaty that would create more sanctuaries and coordinate management of the high seas and punishment of violators.

“The solution is not to just add more patrolling to Argentine waters if hundreds of vessels from different nationalities are operating illegally in the area,” he said. “A strong treaty would also increase international collaboration to crack down on vessels like these that even during a global lockdown will seek to take advantage of any opportunity to plunder our ocean.”



In the tuna-rich waters of the coral triangle in south-east Asia, illegal fishing has long been rife, and locals expect it to grow in the pandemic. Last month Indonesian maritime authorities **seized** three Philippine and two Vietnamese illegal fishing vessels.

“We are prepared for any increase in illegal vessels operating in [Indonesian waters] amid the spread of Covid-19. That is why we are not decreasing our operations as illegal fishing is still rampant,” the government said.

### **News is under threat ...**

... just when we need it the most. Millions of readers around the world are flocking to the Guardian in search of honest, authoritative, fact-based reporting that can help them understand the biggest challenge we have faced in our lifetime. But at this crucial moment, news organisations are facing an unprecedented existential challenge. As businesses everywhere feel the pinch, the advertising revenue that has long helped sustain our journalism continues to plummet. We need your help to fill the gap.

You’ve read 5 articles in the last six months. We believe every one of us deserves equal access to quality news and measured explanation. So, unlike many others, we made a different choice: to keep Guardian journalism open for all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. This would not be possible without financial contributions from our readers, who now support our work from 180 countries around the world.

We have upheld our editorial independence in the face of the disintegration of traditional media - with social platforms giving rise to misinformation, the seemingly unstoppable rise of big tech and independent voices being squashed by commercial ownership. The Guardian’s independence means we can set our own agenda and voice our own opinions. Our journalism is free from commercial and political bias - never influenced by billionaire owners or shareholders. This makes us different. It means we can challenge the powerful without fear and give a voice to those less heard.

Reader financial support has meant we can keep investigating, disentangling and interrogating. It has protected our independence, which has never been so critical. We are so grateful.

We need your support so we can keep delivering quality journalism that’s open and independent. And that is here for the long term. Every reader contribution, however big or small, is so valuable. **Support the Guardian from as little as €1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**