

Thailand leads by example on transparency in the fishing industry

In a bold step in the struggle against illegal practices and human rights abuse in the fishing industry, Thailand has become one of the first countries in Southeast Asia to publish a full list of all its registered and licensed fishing vessels, alongside a ‘watchlist’ of vessels prohibited from fishing, or which have been sunk, damaged or sold to neighbouring countries.

Until recently, Thailand’s fishing fleet has been an unknown quantity, with vessel figures varying hugely depending on the data source. Whilst government statistics for 2015 put the number of registered vessels at 18,089, other government sources declared the figure was closer to 57,000^{1/2}.

Such discrepancies meant that Thailand’s fishing fleet was dangerously unregulated. Vessel registration requirements were also lax, with vessels frequently changing names and identities – exploiting the lack of communication and out-of-date databases amongst provincial authorities and the fact that the national database was neither accessible by relevant authorities nor regularly updated.

Thailand became infamous for ‘ghost vessels’ where two or more vessels would share the same name and same license but operate in different areas. The illegitimate vessel(s), sailing under the same name, would then show a copy of a valid licence to the inspecting authorities. EJF has documented reports of up to 10 boats sharing one license.

To address this, in 2015 the Royal Thai Government instigated nationwide surveys and tightened vessel registration requirements, so all vessels were known to the authorities and could no longer change identity. For years, EJF has advocated for this finalised list of vessels to be electronic, easily updateable, and most importantly, publicly available online.

EJF’s efforts were rewarded in August 2018 as the Marine Department uploaded the complete list of 10,742 commercial vessels eligible to fish in

Thai waters to their website. This list contains all fishing vessels, fish carriers, and support vessels registered in Thailand and vital information about each, including registration number, owner’s name, and port of registration. Such information is crucial for public understanding of vessel authorisation, and will benefit numerous stakeholders, from companies sourcing fish in Thailand to international control authorities. Ultimately, unscrupulous operators will no longer benefit from the opacity of the Thai fishing sector to exploit loopholes and deplete marine resources.

The publication of the central list³ and the ‘watchlist’⁴ comes at a time when Thailand is preparing to become chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2019, providing a unique opportunity to encourage neighbouring countries to follow suit.

Further steps towards a truly transparent fishing sector should include a ‘blacklist’ of sanctioned vessels, information on beneficial ownership of fishing vessels, and standardisation of vessel registration requirements – especially mandating unique vessel identifiers. Many of these initiatives could be achieved with relative ease and without prohibitive costs and the Thai Marine Department is well-placed to facilitate information exchange and regional collaboration.

EJF continues to work alongside the Royal Thai Government to pursue an ambitious and far-reaching transparency agenda, and Thailand is now demonstrating by example that such goals are achievable.

1 Department of Fisheries, Thailand (2012) Number of fishing boat registered by type of fishing method, 2008-2012 https://www.fisheries.go.th/strategy-stat/_webold/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=67

2 Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Thailand (2014) แผนแม่บท การดำ เนิน การแก้ไข ปัญหา แรงงาน ในภาคประมง

3 Marine Department, Thailand (2018) List of fishing vessels involved in legal fishing https://analytics.md.go.th/fisheries_whitelist

4 Marine Department, Thailand (2018) Watchlist of unregistered, locked, or impounded vessels <http://www.md.go.th/app/mdadmin/images/upload/news/9924-002.pdf>