



This story appears in the October issue of National Fisherman

Losing grounds: Self-report or report by force

By [Ray Hilborn](#) September 20, 2018

Effective lobbying by anti-fishing NGOs leading to public concern about the environmental impacts of fishing, are leading to increasing restrictions on commercial fishing far beyond any regulation needed to assure the sustainability of the fishery. Commercial fishing as a livelihood and economic activity is under threat in much of the world.

No country illustrates this better than Australia, where anti-fishing groups have allied themselves with recreational fishing interests to have more and more of the country declared as No Commercial Fishing zones. Pressure from environmental NGOs caused the Australian government to pass a law specifically banning an individual large fishing vessel. A similar alliance in New Zealand is also being very effective at demanding more restrictions on fishing and the public relations by these groups has caused the New Zealand public to believe that marine fish are more threatened with extinction than the native terrestrial animals where roughly half have gone extinct.

In Europe, anti-fishing groups have great power in the European Parliament, successfully banning trawling in waters deeper than 800 meters, enacting a no-discard ban that could cripple commercial fishing, and recently banning electrofishing with trawls, which largely eliminates bottom contact and reduces fuel use.

At the international level ENGOs are pushing for 30 percent of oceans to be declared no-take marine protected areas. The ENGO argument is that commercial fishing uses a public resource for their own profit largely without oversight and is riddled with illegal practices, such as fishing in closed areas, discarding protected species, and misreporting catch. Recent convictions of well-known fishermen for these crimes reinforces the public view of fishermen as pirates.

The commercial fishing industry is losing the battle over the social license to operate.

To maintain the social license to operate, I believe fishing industries worldwide need to step forward and accept levels of transparency in fishing activities that were unimaginable a decade ago. If fishermen were to have detailed position monitoring for all vessels available to government regulators, and 100 percent at-sea coverage of catch and discards by cameras, there would be no argument that fishing is taking place in closed areas, or that discards and bycatch are not being recorded.



The era of secret fishing spots is over. Global fishing activity is being actively tracked using AIS data. New technologies will be in place in the next few years to locate every fishing vessel in the world longer than 30 feet, and this information will be available to the public. Several countries, including Indonesia and Peru, have already agreed to have all VMS records made public.

I suggest that all fishing vessels voluntarily report their position on a minute by minute basis from GPS tracks. This will provide assurance that licensed vessels are fishing where they should, and closed area restrictions are being obeyed. In conjunction with at-sea camera coverage of catch and landings, vessel tracking will assure that vessels are correctly reporting the location of landings.

There are strong incentives not to report bycatch and discard, especially of endangered or threatened species. The public doesn't trust fishermen, and there are enough bad actors in the fishing community that this distrust is sometimes warranted. The only way the public will accept estimates of discards and bycatch is if there are onboard or electronic observation systems. The technology is advancing rapidly, costs are coming down, the fishing fleets need to accept such monitoring as a necessary condition of operation. The more fishing groups work with governments and technology companies, the more rapidly the costs will come down.

These two measures will be repugnant to many fishermen. But the alternative is you will be driven out of business. Many environmental NGOs are supportive of sustainable fishing activities, but there are also well funded NGOs that won't be happy until anything but the smallest fishing vessels are driven from the ocean. These NGOs have allied themselves in some places with small scale fishing groups, recreational fishermen, and competing industrial interests, such as energy production. Their political and economic power is far greater than commercial fishing.

Fishing industries need to establish their own programs for position monitoring and at-sea catch monitoring so they can control the costs of the program and the access to these data. This would involve having independent contractors store the data and provide access as legally required. In some cases, there will be direct benefit to the industry. In the Northeast Pacific, many fishing cooperatives now have independent contractors getting daily updates on position and bycatch and have legally binding agreements to leave areas the contractor closes to avoid bycatch hotspots. Bottom trawling industries will benefit by precise reporting of their location — the more precise the data the smaller the estimated footprint of bottom contact.

Finally, the reputation of fishing is repeatedly tarnished by a few vessels that violate the laws. The "codfather" scandal in New England and falsified reporting of fishing locations in Alaska could both have been prevented by accurate position reporting and at-sea monitoring. It is in the interest of almost all fishermen to prevent such illegal actions.

The technology is now in place for accurate position reporting at very low cost. A \$100 device can record the location of the vessel every minute and upload this via cell phone networks when in port. The technology for electronic catch monitoring is advancing rapidly, and it is a matter of only a few years before it will be practical for almost all vessels. The only real question is whether fishing



industries will put these systems in place, on their terms, or the anti-fishing NGOs will get governments to do it.

Finally, commercial fishing groups need a concerted public relations campaign coordinated with the transparency I have suggested. Fishing provides highly nutritious food at a very low environmental cost, yet most fishing groups seem to spend more energy criticizing their competitors than collaborating to explain to the public the value of seafood. It is time for the fishing industry to present a united front to the public.

Ray Hilborn is a fisheries professor at the University of Washington in Seattle