

# Government corruption in South Africa contributes to overfishing

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Bribery among government officials who inspect fishing along the coast of South Africa contributes to overfishing - this is shown in a new study. Aksel Sundström, PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, examines how corruption hampers the implementation of the regulations that are meant to keep fishing at sustainable levels.

"When I interviewed inspectors they are surprisingly open about this. They tell me that they get a box of fish or just some money from fishermen in exchange for being allowed to break the rules that apply to protected areas or catches," says Aksel Sundström.

Many of South Africa's marine fish stocks are overexploited. At the same time, the government actors that are meant to ensure that fishers abide to rules may be a part of the problem.

For example, one anonymous inspector is quoted to say: "A Chinese captain that was arrested last week called someone who arrived to the harbor with a wad of money. It is quite common ... Imagine these boats, how much money they carry. And we earn so little ... We can make resources of half a million rand disappear from the books. So the temptation is always there."

A recently published research article develops the current understanding of how corruption affects the ability to control what is usually called "the commons". These commons are resources, such as fisheries and forest

areas, which are in rivalry and where it is difficult to exclude users. The essay develops prevailing theories of how one can understand the monitoring of rules for sustainable use.

"Research usually says that regulations are promises of use of resources that can be monitored by the a state or by users themselves. This has been called 'covenants with or without a sword'. But given that corruption is so widespread in many countries, there is a third situation, 'covenants with broken swords'. In these situations the government inspectors are supposed to ensure that rules are followed, but due to bribery, resource users can pay inspectors to break rules," says Aksel Sundström.

Such violations have consequences in different types of resources: elephants and rhinos risk extinction because rangers can be bribed and therefore do not enforce policies to counter poaching. And in South Africa's fisheries sector corruption results in regulations that becomes almost useless.

"Inspectors in this sector clearly become part of the problem. Some act as informants and tips poachers in advance during joint police operations. And some inspectors are themselves engaged in illegal fishing! For example, while I was doing my interviews in early 2014 a police officer in the small city of Simon's Town was arrested with illegal marine resources for over hundred thousand US Dollars in his freezer," says Aksel Sundström.

The paper reported quotes from interviews with over 40 inspectors and key actors in the fisheries sector along South Africa's west and south coasts. Perhaps most surprising is how open everyone is talking about corruption.

"They are very open about how it is done. Maybe it's a little easier to talk

about this with an 'outsider' who can guarantee their anonymity," says Aksel Sundström.

He continues: "One should remember that many of these inspectors face violent repercussions from poachers if they do not allow them to break rules. So increasing their security may in fact decrease bribe taking. Many inspectors want to act honest but face pressure to be a part of corrupt affairs."

**More information:** "Covenants with broken swords: Corruption and law enforcement in governance of the commons." *Global Environmental Change*. [DOI: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.02.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.02.002)

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