

Experts weigh in on impact of new US restrictions on seafood imports

December 16 2016, by Bob Yirka



A school of fish. Scientists have traced the origin of fingers and toes to fish-like creatures that roamed the seas 380 million years ago, according to a new study.

(Phys.org)—A small team of ocean experts from the U.S. and Canada has published a Policy Forum piece in the journal *Science* outlining the possible impact of imminent restrictions on seafood imports into the United States. In their paper, they also suggest ways to reduce the likely negative impact on small countries that export seafood products but do not have the wherewithal to comply with the new U.S. rules.

As the authors note, the U.S. imports more seafood than any other country in the world, and because of that, wields a lot of power in the fishing industry. Back in the early 1970s, the U.S. government passed legislation that has come to be known as The U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA). It outlined a policy that made it illegal to capture or harm certain sea mammals in U.S. waters, including

accidentally when fishing, without a permit. The act covered a host of creatures, including whales, dolphins, sea lions and polar bears.

There were exceptions, of course, such as for fishermen who accidentally caught (known as bycatch) protected mammals—they were allowed to do so only in numbers that allowed for sustainability of populations. The MMPA also put the onus on fishermen and others engaged in the seafood business—they had to prove compliance to be allowed to continue their operations. Most everyone in the industry agrees that passage of the act has been a huge success; many of the protected species have rebounded. Recently, to further protect sea life, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration enacted a new rule, effective January 1, 2017, requiring all countries that export seafood to the U.S. to comply with the MMPA guidelines. The hope is that other countries will comply and because of that, endangered sea animals will face fewer threats.

The authors of the Policy Forum article suggest that the new rules will likely have the desired impact, but it is still not a certainty. How China, the world's largest producer of seafood and largest [seafood](#) exporter to the U.S., reacts will be critical. But perhaps more importantly, they suggest, is the impact the new rules may have on much smaller countries that do not have the money or manpower necessary to monitor the fishing habits of their own citizens. They suggest that the international community will have to work together to develop new approaches to monitoring sea creature populations and sharing data, an effort likely to be led by the U.S., in order for the initiative to succeed.

More information: R. Williams et al. U.S. seafood import restriction presents opportunity and risk, *Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1126/science.aai8222](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aai8222)

Summary

On 1 January 2017, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) will enact a new rule (1) requiring countries exporting seafood to the United States to demonstrate that their fisheries comply with the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). The United States is the world's largest seafood importer (2); the MMPA is among the world's strongest marine mammal protection laws; and most of the world's ~125 marine mammal species are affected by fisheries bycatch (accidental entanglement in fishing gear) (3). This regulation could thus have significant conservation benefits, potentially spilling over to other areas of marine governance, if it is accompanied by substantial investments to boost scientific and compliance capacity in developing countries. Otherwise, it risks having little effect besides inflicting economic hardship on already poor communities.

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