

# Call for cooperation as 'blue boats' rob Pacific reefs

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Sea cucumbers are illegally targeted in Pacific waters. Credit: Kevin McLoughlin/ kevsboot on Pixabay.

A flotilla of Vietnamese fishing boats with crews suffering in harsh conditions is stripping Pacific coral reefs of seafood as the poaching escalates to become an international human rights and security issue.

Dr. Andrew Song, joint ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and WorldFish research fellow at James Cook University, has produced the first analysis of international attempts to manage Vietnam's 'blue [boat](#)' fleet—small fishing vessels, commonly painted blue, that travel thousands of kilometres to fish illegally in Pacific waters.

Dr. Song said the reasons are allegedly economic but also geopolitical as the intensified Chinese presence/interference has squeezed them out of their traditional fishing grounds in the South China Sea.

"The boats are between 10-15 metres in length and carry up to 17 people. The crews reportedly have no contract of employment and no insurance and are frequently abandoned after accidents or arrests. They travel more than 7000km around the Pacific and stay up to three months at sea, Dr. Song said.

He said their main targets are high-value species of sea cucumber and giant clam found on many Pacific Island coral reefs.

Dr. Song estimates the cost of the boats to be around AU\$15,000-35,000 each, while processed tropical sea cucumber species can retail at AU\$150-300 per kilogram in Hong Kong and Chinese markets. He said there is suspicion that the blue boats were meeting large 'mother-ships' in the open ocean to offload their catch and take on supplies. This is yet to be confirmed.

"The collection of sea cucumber in foreign waters is apparently easier and less dangerous, since sea cucumber is still found six to seven metres deep on Pacific island reefs, whereas people have to dive 60 metres, even 80 metres in waters near Vietnam," Dr. Song said.

"The poaching also directly endangers the livelihood security of coastal communities and a significant source of national export revenue in the

Pacific. Sea cucumber fisheries are considered to be the second-most valuable export fishery for Pacific Island countries," he said.

Dr. Song said Pacific Island countries face limitations in securing the resources to patrol such a vast area, and the wooden boats are difficult to find, even with radar, and harder to trace administratively than a large ship. He said the problem is intensifying.

"In Australian waters, the latest reported figures show the number of foreign fishing boats caught operating illegally has increased from six in 2014 up to 20 in 2016 with most originating from Vietnam and Indonesia," he said.

Dr. Song said the poachers can be seen as a new kind of security threat—endangering the lives of Vietnamese fishers, endangering food security for Pacific Island nations, and putting Pacific Island economies, coastal communities and the workers on the boats at risk.

"By their dispersed and random nature, blue boats are bolstering the need for closer cooperation not only among governments and agencies but also among coastal communities and individual fishers.

"Given the large unpredictability associated with these boats, it will need a co-ordinated and networked response," he said.

**More information:** Andrew M. Song et al, 'Blue boats' and 'reef robbers': A new maritime security threat for the Asia Pacific?, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/apv.12240](https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12240)

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