

...AND
NOTHING BUT
THE TRUTH

GUARDIANS OF THE DEEP BLUE

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There is a place where crime goes largely unnoticed. What's more, it's a huge place – you can't go in any direction and not find it. Rampant criminal acts, such as fraud, widespread theft, false imprisonment, rape, and even murder occur with impunity, because these serious violations are both unreported and hidden from public view. Astonishingly, this "place" is the largest geographic entity on the planet: our oceans.

I've always had an interest and a love for the ocean and now they are intersecting with my dedication to law enforcement ideals, so heave to, mates, we're going to take a short trip (and, no, we won't end up like Gilligan). From a policing standpoint, this is fascinating – though troubling – stuff.

Most countries have a 13 mile jurisdictional limit before the sea morphs into a legally nebulous status we call "international waters." Once outside this 13 mile boundary, ships – and those who are employed on them – are governed by their country's flag of registry. Commercial fishing is perhaps the industry which is most rife with criminal activity. To begin with, there are fishing "zones" designated by a given country and rogue fishing vessels are known to poach these waters illegally for prized species such as the Patagonian toothfish (better known at your favorite restaurant as Chilean sea bass). You may have your own vision of what a "fishing ship" might be, but imagine a vessel which tows behind it a net which is a



mile wide. When they crank these gigantic nets in, their intended catch is mixed in with many other species and dumped into a huge sorting area below deck. By the time the unwanted catch is separated and tossed overboard, they are usually dead. You have to have permission to fish in a country's waters, but some boat captains regularly violate them because it's relatively easy. Who has enough police boats to watch their 13 mile jurisdictional limits? And, if a boat is actually spotted fishing illegally, who will "chase" it and for how long?


Peter Hammarstadt might. He's the founder of Sea Shepherd, a not for profit organization which is dedicated to identifying and chasing down seafaring lawbreakers for a variety of criminal violations. His three ship vigilante navy has received funding from wealthy donors and even environmental organizations, giving them the manpower,

fuel and equipment to detect and even pursue the worst violators. It's a grueling dangerous job. The flagship, *Bob Barker*, once followed a notorious violator, the *Thunder*, a Lagos-flagged trawler, for *two months* through some of the planet's most treacherous waters before the offending captain had to put into port for fuel. The problem (a common one) was that the port country had no jurisdiction to enforce those particular violations, since they didn't occur in their waters, so they did nothing. Still, Sea Shepherd's crew remains undaunted, finding every way they can to investigate criminal activity on the high seas which is often in the form of human abuse.

Those who find work in maritime industries are often on society's fringe; they can be destitute and unable to find other work or they are evading legal troubles on land. Most are desperate for work, so much so that they may endure workdays lasting up to 20 hours along with insanely low pay. Predatory shipowners and captains take full advantage of their

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situation, sometimes withholding pay for months after a trip – and a fishing “trip” can continue for weeks or longer. The living quarters on some of these ships are cramped, unsanitary flotillas of disease. One Greek ship was about to be “caught” so the captain scuttled the vessel, intentionally sinking it to destroy evidence. He didn’t notify the rest of the crew as he and his first mate escaped on liferafts while the rest of the 22 man crew was left on a sinking death trap. Many of them died. Men who sign up for work on these vessels are largely uneducated, unskilled and financially destitute. They sign unconscionable contracts and have no money to pay lawyers to represent them in civil actions. Instead, they just accept the abusive lifestyle and even go back to it for lack of a better option.

In going after the worst violators, Hammarstadt and the other members of Sea Shepherd’s courageous home-grown navy aren’t completely alone. Interpol has been made aware of fishing violations for decades and, while they can’t dispatch ships to find and catch them, they do have a system for identifying the most serious offenders. Interpol’s strategy involves color coded categories, the “purple notice” list reserved for the most egregious violators. This list is provided to every country’s law enforcement resources and to recognized private forces like Sea Shepherd. Oceangoing criminal behavior is no laughing matter. Besides the harsh and illegal treatment of maritime workers, illegal seafood catches make up about 20% of what ends up in the world’s seafood markets. Local wholesalers in many countries ask few questions if they can pay a discounted rate for their merchandise and so the seafood industry is flooded with goods which have no identifying marks or serial numbers to tell you how they were obtained or by whom. It’s hard to believe, but the sustainability of the ocean is in peril because of these unlawful activities. We all know that, as local law enforcement, our hands are pretty much tied. The Coast Guard might snag illegal

fishing vessels from time to time, but that’s certainly not part of their mission, with tasks like the trafficking of drugs and humans to attend to. Finding illegal fishing boats is probably way down on their list. Now imagine most other countries whose maritime law enforcement capabilities are way less than ours and you realize the free reign which the vast ocean provides for unlawful acts of all kinds.

There are so many layers to this problem. The results of unchecked maritime activity involves not just the taking of sea life, but human trafficking, human rights violations and working conditions which sometimes come close to outright slavery. There is even a doctor in Mexico who takes women out to international waters to perform abortions, away from the clutches of Mexican legal jurisdiction. In his remarkable book, *The Outlaw Ocean*, author Ian Urbina recounts some of these harrowing stories in great detail. Urbina did more than just research and interviews; he accompanied Hammarstadt aboard the *Bob Barker* (read the book to see why they named it that), enduring storms, sleepless nights and exhausting investigations, all thousands of miles from land.

As someone who grew up on the water, I hope the future of international law enforcement involves greater application of resources for the protection of the ocean, of legitimate maritime industries, and the people who work in them. **P&SN**

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