

Trawler, trawler, hauling the net How many fish do you get?

Indeed this is a critical question to the countless fishing trawlers floating in oceans, seas, or in bays of India and capturing tonnes of marine animals along the coasts or elsewhere.

TRAWLER is the most commonly used ship in marine fish catch. Numerically speaking, it contributes to nearly half of the marine fish production (nearly 1.43 million tonnes during 2017–19). Also, more than 75% of the marine fish exported from India have been provided by them. While in action, these medium-sized ships with sweeping nets scrape off all the living organisms from ocean floors. The nets with small mesh sizes do not even allow juveniles, spawns, eggs, or larvae to escape.

The practice of bottom trawling was introduced in India specifically to harvest shrimp, and species other than shrimps were considered bycatch. However, trawlers in marine fisheries have often been involved in co-catching several species other than commonly useful ones employing non-selective gears for commercial fishing. The percentage of bycatch in trawlers was more than 80 along the coasts of India. In the early years, the entire portion of the bycatch was discarded owing to the limitation of fish preservation and transportation. One can imagine the amount of wastage incurred by trawling! As a result, trawling has been projected as the most destructive fishing activity and seems responsible for a high percentage of bycatch.

Though very little is known about the exact quanta of the damage indiscriminate extraction of biological resources is bound to be ecologically disastrous in the longer run. Conservationists and environmental activists have been flagging this issue and called for a blanket ban on trawling nets. Perhaps they have every reason to be skeptical as the threat has grown in intensity in recent years. With the improved transportation and



preservation facilities, the bycatch of trawling is in high demand in the domestic and international markets for animal-feed making or other downstream industrial applications. It has led to a significant shift in the purpose of trawling to extract marine resources that fetch the highest economic return. So, the term ‘bycatch’ was reincarnated and assumed a new ‘avatar’ when considering this shift in the target groups. With the heavy demand from industry, resource extraction has skyrocketed. The number of trawlers increased, and so did the quantity of bycatch. Talks, discussions, and re-discussions involving the stakeholders have been in full swing. Several initiatives and regulations are put in place to mitigate the socio-ecological impact of bottom trawling. But, we need a reconnaissance to fathom the actual change, small it may be.

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