**Ocean Grabbing**

  26th February 2020

Introduction

Ocean grabbing refers to the dispossession or appropriation of use, control or access to ocean space or resources from prior resource users, rights holders, or inhabitants; often small-scale fishers and local coastal communities.[2](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-2-115)

Dispossession may occur through “inappropriate governance processes that might employ acts that undermine human security or livelihoods, or produce impacts that impair social-ecological well-being”.[3](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-3-115)

Several boats in a harbor

Description automatically generated*By*[*dany13*](https://www.flickr.com/photos/dany13/)*: PICT0111/Burma/Myanmar/Sittwe/ Fishing Boat – Fisherman are very active because fish market is the main production of this area in North Burma*

Characteristics

*Practices*

The focus on ocean grabbing has evolved from a growing interest in land grabbing.[4](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-4-115) It diverges from land grabbing, however, because it involves not just the appropriation of territorial space, commonly referred to as enclosure, but also of licenses to exploit marine resources such as fish.[5](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-5-115)

There are multiple ways in which ocean grabbing takes place. These may include the (over)harvesting of resources, the dispossession of lands for tourism or other purposes (also referred to as coastal grabbing), and the relocation of communities during conservation efforts such as the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).[6](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-6-115)

Ocean grabbing policies can occur because of environmental or fisheries management policies, including when marine resources are privatised, or new resource allocations are assigned through licensing measures and quotas such as Rights-Based Fishing or Individual Transferable Quotas.[7](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-7-115) This can result in small-scale fishers being denied the legal right to fish, and the concentration of fishing rights in the hands of larger scale interests.[8](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-8-115)

Much ocean grabbing takes place in the context of ostensibly sustainable marine economic development initiatives, or what has become known as the ‘blue growth’ agenda. The World Bank has introduced a USD 6.4 billion Blue Growth Portfolio (PROBLUE) for example.[9](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-9-115) The EU has a Blue Growth Strategy [10](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-10-115) as do numerous individual states, especially in the Global South.[11](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-11-115) Environmental initiatives can also result in ocean grabbing through conservation or clime change mitigation policies.[12](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-12-115)

There is an expectation that ocean grabbing will expand further as deep-sea mining becomes more viable, resulting in seabed grabbing.[13](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-13-115) It has been noted that power in the International Seabed Authority, which regulates the deep seabed, rests in the hands of those who hold proprietary data and greater access to capital.[14](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-14-115) Other influences include development pressures, local demography, financial markets, political processes, global environmental change, and environmental declines.[15](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-15-115)

*Perpetrators*

Ocean grabbing can be perpetrated by states or private stakeholders [16](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-16-115) The cause of ocean grabbing is often the power differential between those doing the appropriation and those being dispossessed.[17](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-17-115) This may be between small-scale fishers and governments, whether at local or national levels, or between developed and developing countries.[18](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-18-115)

*Motivation*

Not all land reallocation or licensing policies can be classed as ocean grabbing. Properly designed, “integrated efforts can result in sustainable and shared economic development, poverty reduction, and healthy marine ecosystems”.[19](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-19-115) However, there are three broad categories of ocean grabbing activity that have been found to have more negative consequences.

The first comprise measures that are undertaken with good intentions, but are poorly designed or governed, with negative effects on small-scale fishers and coastal communities. The most common form is the regulation of marine spaces of conservation or environmental management purposes.[20](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-20-115) While the intention of such schemes may be laudable, they can also have negative impacts on those who are dependent on the sea for their livelihoods, especially if their interests are not considered at the design and implementation stage.[21](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-21-115)

The second is ocean grabbing which is undertaken with the intention to displace small fishers for profit, albeit through legal mechanisms. Such ‘perfectly legal’ reallocation processes may or may not involve coercion and violence but are rarely considered to be socially legitimate.[22](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-22-115) Practices such as community eviction, progressive privatisation, non-transparent transactions, or the uneven implementation of fishing quotas might be problematic, especially if the government is not considered legitimate by local communities and does not involve them in the decision-making process. There has also been an increasing tendency to ‘blue-wash’ such acquisitions through attempts to obscure the financial accumulation with the suggestion that these grabs are for primarily environmental purposes.[23](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-23-115)

Finally, ocean grabbing is sometimes undertaken for the purposes of rent-seeking, using criminal means including coercion, the subversion of political processes, bribery, and corruption.[24](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-24-115) One example is the ocean grabbing activities of Myanmar’s military junta, who appropriated ocean space to extract rent from fisheries and the off-shore gas sector.[25](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-25-115) Many communities were dispossessed, and rents were also siphoned off into personal bank accounts.[26](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-26-115)

Scope

Much of the literature on ocean grabbing covers either conceptual debates surrounding the term itself or individual case studies. As yet, there is no work which estimates the scope of the issue. This may arise from the complexity of the issue and the different forms of ocean grabbing.

Impact

*Soci*o*economic*

The primary impact of ocean grabbing is the removal of resources from local communities. This can impact on food security and livelihoods.[27](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-27-115) Even if local communities do not directly lose access to the resource, they can become controlled in a manner where the local community is forced to change and adapt. An example of this issue is the expansion of large-scale fish processing facilities which concentrate supply-chain activities and therefore exclude local communities from trading and processing the catches as they did before.[28](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-28-115) Culture, traditions and social cohesion can therefore also be undermined. When coercion and violence is used, the physical safety of local communities can also be threatened, while corruption and bribery can undermine the rule of law.[29](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-29-115)

*Environmental*

Paradoxically, ocean grabbing can sometimes also have a negative environmental impact. Poorly designed environmental interventions came end up targeting smaller-scale users of the ocean while allowing more systemic damaging practices to continue or even expand. This can cause further ecological destruction and biodiversity loss. Some have argued that these conservation measures act as a “smokescreen which diverts attention away from the systemic changes required” to ensure long term marine environmental sustainability.[30](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-30-115)

Responses

Because ocean grabbing is often undertaken by the state, or at least in partnership with the state, there have been few responses so far. Small scale fishers have called for a focus on a human rights-based model that allow them to access and use marine and fisheries resources.[31](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-31-115)

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has produced voluntary guidelines to encourage the use of participatory approaches in (blue) growth and (marine) environmental initiatives. These comprise the 2012 ‘Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security’,[32](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-32-115) and the 2014 ‘Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Alleviation’ documents.[33](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-33-115)

Both were produced through an inclusive process in which various social movements had a role in shaping their content.[34](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-34-115) The guidelines represent the first international instrument aimed at promoting and defending the special needs and interests of small-scale fisheries, and applying a human rights-based approach to the governance of land, fisheries and forests. Implementation challenges remain however.[35](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-35-115)

At a national level, some countries have introduced Territorial User Rights in Fisheries (TURF) initiatives, which reserve designated marine spaces for small scale fisheries.[36](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-36-115) However, for such measures to have an impact, they require political will and effective monitoring and enforcement capacities, which may be lacking in regions where ocean grabbing is a significant problem. In some cases, local communities have organised collectively to resist ocean grabbing activities, including by taking direct action, by pursuing legal actions, and through fora such as the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP [37](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/26/ocean-grabbing/#easy-footnote-bottom-37-115)

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