

International criminal enterprises dump millions of pounds of illegally caught salmon onto the European market. The salmon, caught with the notorious driftnets, continues to show up on the Dutch, French and British markets, according to joint investigations by American and Canadian authorities.

The driftnets, up to 40 miles long and described by its opponents as the 'wall of death', threaten the oceans with an ecological disaster of a global dimension comparable to the greenhouse effect.

Since 1986 the Taiwanese, South Korean and Japanese driftnetfleets have fished the North Pacific for squid and salmon. Pirate fleets of as many as 90 driftnet fishing vessels, violate their own domestic laws and fish continuously outside of the internationally agreed upon legal driftnet boundaries. The pirates intercept salmon on their way back to the rivers and streams of North America and Russia and threaten the natural salmon resources of those countries. The salmon, frozen at sea, is shipped mainly through the ports of Hong Kong and Singapore to Thailand and Malaysia where the salmon is canned. These countries dump the salmon on the world markets at rock bottom low prices.

"For years these pirates have been stealing our salmon", says an angry, Alaskan fisherman from the U.S.. "This piracy must stop or they'll kill the seas." It's no wonder the fishermen feel frustrated. Long before the rest of the world knew anything about driftnets, the Alaskans complained about the effect of the Japanese driftnet fleet on their native salmon runs.

Salmon migrate from freshwater streams to the high seas of the North Pacific ocean. After swimming around at sea for a couple of years they return to the streams of origin to spawn. During their lifecycle at sea salmon will most likely encounter an invisible enemy; 'the wall of death'.

The wall of death consists of plastic gillnets that float on the surface of the ocean and weighted on the bottom by a heavy rope, hang, like an invisible curtain, 15 meters deep in the water. One fishing boat can lay up to 64 kilometers in a single day. Each night the Asian driftnetfleets, comprised of 1100 vessels, lay a wall of nets with a total length of more than 32000 kilometers and each year the nets ensnare and kill millions of seabirds and non-food fish species and thousands of marine mammals such as whales, dolphins and seals. Most of this bycatch is thrown overboard.

In 1989 worldwide concern about this devastating fishing technology led to an unanimously accepted resolution by the United Nations which

asked for a worldwide moratorium on the use of driftnets by June 30 1992. Major driftnet countries have agreed to phase out driftnetting during the course of 1992 following a consensus agreement of the Second Committee in the U.N.. A U.N. General Assembly agreement is expected sometime next week. Outstanding is the issue of implementation and enforcement of the agreement.

The pirate fleet ignores what few laws and international agreements have been established and continues to poach and sell salmon to the world market. Often the pirate vessels operate without a flag or cover their markings. Sometimes they even operate under flags of other nations; in 1990 Russian authorities seized a North Korean driftnet fleet illegally fishing for salmon. The vessels and more than 140 of its crew members turned out to be Japanese.

“The pirate fleets violate their own domestic laws and therefore they fish illegally”, says Wayne Lewis, special agent in charge of the National Marine Fisheries Service Office of Enforcement in Seattle, Washington. “Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and recently also China prohibit their fishing vessels from catching and keeping salmon.” The pirates also violate bilateral agreements between the U.S., Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. These nations agreed upon boundaries for the legal driftnet fishing areas and forbid the retention of salmon caught by their fishing boats.

“After 5 years of investigations we have amassed overwhelming evidence that several international criminal enterprises illegally catch and sell North American salmon”, stated a NMFS press release earlier this year. The pirates are mainly Taiwanese and catch an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 metric tons a year. Agent Lewis told reporters for the American magazine Pacific Fishing that some U.S. government officials doubted the extent of the salmon scam. “If you don’t believe me, then believe the Taiwanese”, was his comment.

An article in the Taiwanese newspaper United Daily News of July 2 this year openly described the details of the piracy; In view of the global ban on driftnetting in July 1992, fishermen plan to make a great deal of money first and have ordered their driftnet fishing boats to catch salmon and trout in the North Pacific off-limit areas. Fifty fishing boats applied to operate in the Indian Ocean and have lied about the operating locations since they sailed for the North Pacific in an attempt to evade the control and examination of the fisheries administration...

A spokesman for the Taiwanese fisheries administration said it was unfortunate some local fishing boats have been illegally catching

salmon with driftnets. He said the government repeatedly demanded that fisherman abide by the rules and not illegally catch salmon and trout.

For the fishermen it is worth the risk of capture by American authorities because a single trip to forbidden waters can net them 20 million Taiwanese dollars. The fishing boats unload the salmon at sea onto freighters which take the salmon to far eastern ports. Fish brokers sell the salmon to countries which can the fish. The route the canned salmon follows is often hard to trace; 'Operation Retread', a joint undercover investigation by the NMFS and the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Ocean exposed a smuggling ring whereby fishbrokers tried to smuggle Taiwanese, illegally caught salmon through China, Thailand and Chile into the U.S.. To date, a total of 34 U.S. and foreign fishbrokers and associated companies have been convicted.

In contrast to the U.S. it's not forbidden in Europe to import illegally caught salmon. "Part of this illegally caught salmon is smuggled directly into Japan and disappears. How much, we don't know but the salmon which doesn't go to Japan ends up in canneries in Thailand or in warehouses in Singapore. The Thai companies export the canned salmon to Europe and Australia. Keep in mind that we're dealing with a criminal element. Everytime we solve one of their smuggling schemes they come up with a new one", says agent Lewis. Milton M. Rose, trade officer with the NMFS went to Thailand and worked with the canneries on the salmon issue. "The Thai are aware what's happening but they're not really doing anything about it. All they do is talk about it. At first they denied they were canning illegally caught salmon on a large scale, then they said the canning industry would police itself. That just doesn't do. Their import statistics show a couple of hundred tons of legal salmon coming into the country but they export thousands of tons of salmon. It is obvious that the gap in these figures is filled with illegally caught salmon but since they mix legal with illegal salmon it's hard to tell which can is contains what." A paper on driftnet salmon marketing by the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans confirms what the NMFS says. This paper is also mentioned in a report presented in June to the United Nation pursuant to the driftnet resolution.

"While the sales of illegally caught salmon have been successfully prevented by Canada, the U.S. and Japan in their own markets, the sales of driftnet salmon have continued at relatively high levels in other foreign markets. This product continues to show up in the

Netherlands, France, Britain and Australia”, is written on the first page of the document.

The NMFS said; “EC statistics indicate that countries with no legal access to Pacific salmon grounds (Korea, Singapore and Thailand) have captured a share of 6.4% of the EC frozen and canned salmon market. These products are imported unhindered into EC countries. Thailand packs most of this salmon but Malaysia and the Philippines are also emerging as Pacific salmon packers. Thai exporters are underselling similar U.S. product by 25%.”

The Netherlands, France and Britain are the largest importers of Asian canned salmon. The Netherlands being the largest and Britain the smallest of the three. These three countries imported a total of 4080 metric tons of Asian packed salmon in 1989, 2080 metric tons in 1990. One quarter of all canned salmon imported by the Netherlands in 1990 came from Thailand or Malaysia.

“I know that in the past some Dutch fishbrokers imported salmon from Asian packers, principally from Thailand. Our company didn’t, we buy from the U.S. and Canada”, says van der Zwan spokesman for Gloe & CO. BV, a Dutch importer of salmon products. “The Americans call it illegal, if that’s true I don’t know.” According to van der Zwan ,Dutch imports from Asian countries have dropped over the last two years because Thai exporters can no longer compete with the low prices of the higher quality American and Canadian salmon products. “The salmon import figures you see now are the leftovers from old contracts. I wouldn’t be surprised if you won’t see any Thai salmon coming in to the Netherlands next year.” Milton Rose from the NMFS, on the other hand, claims the Asian companies can compete with the low prices of the U.S. and Canadian salmon products. “The capital needed to catch and process the salmon is, because of low laborcosts in those countries, so small it’s negligible and the profit margin is so huge it’s still an incentive to produce the salmon, even with the depressed prices on the salmon market.”

Another Dutch salmon importer said almost all Dutch importers buy Thai canned salmon from time to time though it is only a very small part of their total salmon imports. “but”, he said, “There are several firms which buy almost exclusively from Thailand and re-export some of this to a chain of grocery stores in Belgium.” He thought ‘the Americans handle the problem in a boyish manner by shouting accusations which they can’t prove.’

Many European importers vowed to refuse buying driftnet caught tuna because of the much publicized dolphin bycatch and because of the pressure from environmental organisation such as Greenpeace. But importers haven't changed their purchasing policies of driftnet caught salmon. Greenpeace in the Netherlands says; " We have spoken with almost all of the Dutch tuna importers and they claim they no longer buy driftnet caught tuna. If it turns out that these same companies are involved in buying driftnet caught salmon, then this industry is playing deaf. We will certainly look into this matter." The NMFS says the European brokers are aware how and where this salmon is caught. Van der Zwan claims the opposite; "I believe not every importer knows how the salmon is caught. They buy it in cans and that's it." A Dutch importer of Thai canned salmon selling under the brandname Stella Maris admitted his company buys salmon from Thailand but ' I know nothing about this salmon being caught without the permission of Americans, you'd have to talk to my supplier in Thailand", and another importer said; "we don't really have time to look into these matters. We just buy the stuff from Thailand with certificates of origin, so everything is in perfect order."

The importers don't violate any EC laws but even so, there's something 'fishy' about canned salmon imported from Asian countries. 'The Americans call it illegal', some importers say. With their comments they insinuate that as Europeans it is none of their concern and they say the Americans and Canadians can't come up with hard facts. The Americans and Canadians, on the other hand, feel they have solid evidence and say the salmon is caught illegally because the governments of Japan, Taiwan, Korea and China prohibit their fishing vessels from catching and keeping salmon. The pirates, who have been caught red handed, ignore the rules and fish illegally for salmon with driftnets. Criminal organisations smuggle the salmon through elaborate schemes into countries which process the salmon and export the canned salmon.

It may seem as if the consumer gets this product at a very low cost but as long as the salmon is caught by these destructive driftnets it's actually a very high price to pay.