

PLUNDERING THE SEAS: HOW ILLEGAL FISHING IS DESTROYING GOA'S MARINE LEGACY

Despite court orders, inspections, and decades of protests, Goa's traditional fishing communities rue that their demands continue to be ignored in policy documents and budgets. The fishermen tell **TEAM HERALD** that their nets are empty and patience, running thin



The sea has been generous to Goa's traditional fishing communities for generations, but today, its bounty is disappearing before their eyes. For the Ramponnkars, Magkars, Cantaikars, and Pagelkars who have fished these waters for centuries, each day brings fresh evidence that their way of life is being systematically erased—not by nature, but by neglect, illegal fishing operations, and policies that favour industrial operators over small-scale fishers.

Government promises, but fishermen sceptical

Fisheries Minister Nilkanth Halarnkar has vowed strong legal action against those responsible for illegal fishing practices, stating, "The government will not tolerate practices that threaten Goa's marine resources." However, traditional fishermen remain sceptical of these assurances. "The department has been claiming these generators have legitimate uses and aren't for LED fishing," said a GRE representative. "But we've always known they're specifically installed to operate illegal LED arrays. These 60-150 KVA generators annihilate juvenile fish and destroy our nets' catch."

The facts speak plainly: a 24th January 2024 inspection by Goa Shipyard Limited, ordered by the Bombay High Court, found that 14 out of 16 inspected vessels were equipped with banned LED fishing arrays and generators to power them—directly contradicting the Fisheries Department's claims that generators were only used for refrigeration. None of these boats had licensed operators or proper safety equipment such as life rafts or distress signals. Yet, despite these shocking findings—which took six months for the department to submit to court—only three boats faced penalties, with fines as low as Rs. 50,000, less than the value of a single night's illegal catch.

A community in waiting: High court's pending verdict

As traditional fishermen continue their desperate wait for justice, many view the pending High Court judgment on LED fishing as their last hope. "My business has been down for the last three years as workers refuse to stay back when the catch is meagre," shares a dejected fisherman from South Goa. "Baby king prawns, kingfish, crabs, and other fish are drawn by LED lights and drift away. We are desperately waiting for the judgment of the High Court."

The Goa Foundation, through its writ petition, has argued vigorously for the implementation of the all-India ban on LED fishing and for prohibiting diesel generator sets on fishing trawlers. However, fishermen believe powerful interests are working against them. "The ma-

GOA'S FISHING CRISIS	
■ LED FISHING BAN VIOLATIONS: 14 of 16 inspected boats had illegal LED arrays (GSL Report 2024)	■ PENDING DEMANDS: Amendments to 1980 Act, radar surveillance, market control for traditional fishers
■ MONSOON BAN IGNORED: 5 trawlers caught fishing in Zuari River June 2024 (AGSSRFU report)	■ ECOLOGICAL IMPACT: Destructive fishing destroying nursing grounds for fish species
■ SHRINKING SUBSIDIES: Cut from Rs 50,000 to Rs 30,000 despite rising fuel costs	
■ FAILED ENFORCEMENT: Coastal police patrol boats non-operational since 2022	
■ KARNATAKA TRAWLERS: Regularly invade Goan waters using banned bull trawling methods	

fia that dictates terms to the Fisheries Department is keeping the ban at bay," alleges one fisherman who wished to remain anonymous, fearing retaliation from large trawler owners. "I have presented video evidence to the director of Fisheries regarding LED fishing, but no action has been initiated so far."

The cat-and-mouse game of illegal fishing

This pattern of lax enforcement has become all too familiar. Between 5th June and 23rd June 2024, during the critical monsoon fishing ban period—when fish stocks are meant to recover—five mechanised trawlers were observed conducting illegal operations in the Zuari River, operating nightly from 10 PM until 2:30 AM. The All Goa Small Scale Responsible Fisheries Union (AGSSRFU) documented these violations in a letter addressed to multiple government authorities, including the Superintendent of Police for Coastal Security, the Director of Fisheries, and the Captain of Ports.

"We called the fisheries control room repeatedly whenever we saw these illegal operations," said Laximan Mangueskar, Secretary of AGSSRFU. "Either no one answered, or no action was ever taken against these violations."

Fishermen report that illegal operators have adapted their methods to avoid detection. "Those adopting LED fishing do so from the high seas now," observes another fisherman from the South. "They cannot be seen nearby, and some of them even keep their dinghy out in the sea." This cat-and-mouse game makes enforcement even more challenging for already under-resourced authorities.

Ecological and economic devastation

The consequences of this enforcement failure are devastating. Olencio Simoes, General Secretary of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), explains: "Due

to the negligent use of such destructive gear by a handful of purse-seine owners, it has totally destroyed the nursing grounds of several species of fish and marine ecology."

The impact on marine ecosystems is severe—bull trawling destroys seabed habitats, while LED arrays attract and trap entire schools of fish, including juveniles that never get a chance to breed.

A system stacked against indigenous tradition

While traditional fishermen continue to allege that illegal operators flourish, they point out that they are struggling with dwindling support. Their fuel subsidies were cut from Rs. 50,000 annually before COVID-19 to just Rs. 30,000 today, even as diesel prices have soared. "We demand its restoration and enhancement to Rs. 75,000," said Laximan Mangueskar of AGSSRFU. Their plea to increase the subsidy in the 2025 state budget was ignored.

The situation has become so dire that traditional fishermen are taking loans just to continue fishing. "A single net can cost Rs. 15,000 to replace, while the average traditional fisherman earns just Rs. 8,000-12,000 per month," explained Custodio D'Souza of the Old Cross Canoe Association.

Endless wait for infrastructure

The infrastructure failures compound these challenges. At Betul, where the Sal River meets the sea, a sandbar blocks trawlers from safe passage for hours each day. A breakwater project to solve this problem has been promised for 15 years but remains undelivered. "The Chief Minister recently assured to expedite work on this matter," noted Goenchea Ramponkaranchi Ekvott (GRE) in their memorandum, but fishermen have yet to see any progress.

Meanwhile, when cyclones damage fishing gear—a regular occurrence—there is no insurance scheme to help cover the costs. GRE has repeatedly demanded "an insurance policy to protect fishermen's equipment, including canoes,

motors, and nets," but these calls have gone unanswered.

The enforcement farce

The enforcement system appears fundamentally broken. Agnelo Rodrigues, President of Goenchea Ramponkaranchi Ekvott (GRE), describes a pattern of inaction: "There are boats using illegal fishing equipment and carrying out illegal bull trawling in Goan territorial waters using high-speed engines. We have approached the Fisheries Department constantly and submitted many memorandums to the government, but no substantial action has been taken."

While the coastal police have responded here and there, they are also handicapped as many of their patrol boats have been non-operational for years. "The coastal police in Goa need more patrol boats or repairs/replacements for the existing patrol boats," Rodrigues stated. "In other states, they act quickly, but in our state, it is slow."

Karnataka fishers' illegal incursions

The issue of Karnataka's Malpe trawlers illegally entering Goan waters has become particularly galling. "The Malpe illegal boats from Karnataka are continuously entering the territorial waters of Goa using high-speed engines and scooping up all the fish by illegally using bull trawling methods," GRE noted in their March 2025 memorandum. "It is an utter shame that even after the local fishermen have caught these illegal boats and brought them to the notice of the Fisheries Department, these boats continue fishing in our state without fear of the law."

The High Court is their chance

As the Bombay High Court continues to monitor the LED fishing case it first took up in 2023, its patience with the Fisheries Department's inaction wears thin. The department's six-month delay in submitting the damning inspection report, coupled with its failure to impose significant penalties on violators, suggests what activists call "institutional complicity" in the destruction of Goa's fisheries.

Young fishermen across coastal villages are increasingly abandoning the profession, unable to sustain themselves on dwindling catches and mounting debts. As Olencio Simoes puts it: "We have done everything right—followed the rules, protected the ecosystem, sounded the alarm. Now we wait to see if anyone will listen before it is too late."

For now, fishing has become an exercise of waiting with a hook that has no bait. The nets are coming up empty, and with them, the patience of generations of fishermen who have stewarded these waters is running out.

QUOTEROOM

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"If proper and prompt action is not taken today by the Fisheries Department, then Goan fishermen will have to stop going out to fish altogether as there won't be any fish in the sea to fish in the future — Camilo Souza, ramponkar, Velsao

"My business has been down for the last three years as workers refuse to stay back when the catch is meagre. Baby king prawns, kingfish, crabs, and other fish are drawn by LED lights and drift away. We are desperately waiting for the judgment of the High Court — Fisherman, South Goa

"The mafia that dictates terms to the Fisheries Department is keeping the ban (against generators on trawlers that power LEDs) at bay. I have presented video evidence to the director of Fisheries regarding LED fishing, but no action has been initiated so far — Fisherman

