

INDIA'S MARINE FISHERIES POTENTIAL – ECONOMY

India has introduced new draft rules to regulate fishing in its EEZ and the High Seas, mandating vessel authorization and aligning with global standards. The framework aims to sustainably develop underutilized deep-sea resources, with a strategic focus on creating tuna hubs in the Andaman & Nicobar islands.

Introduction – Charting a Course for Sustainable Fishing

The Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying has introduced a new set of draft rules and guidelines aimed at promoting “sustainable” fishing practices. This new framework specifically targets fishing activities within India's vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and on the High Seas, seeking to balance economic growth with ecological responsibility.

The Untapped Potential of India's Fisheries Sector

India's fisheries sector is a cornerstone of its blue economy, possessing immense natural advantages and a strong foundation for future growth.

Geographic and Production Powerhouse – With a sprawling coastline of approximately 11,098.81 km, dotted with 1,457 landing centers and 3,461 fishing villages, India has a robust physical infrastructure for marine activities. Globally, India is the third-largest fish-producing country, contributing 8% of the world's total production in 2022–2023.

Vast Marine Resources – The country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers nearly 2 million square kilometers, a massive area with an estimated annual potential of 5.31 million metric tonnes (MMT) from capture fisheries. Recent figures show that India's marine fish catch is approaching this potential, with 44.95 lakh tonnes (~4.5 MMT) recorded in 2023–24.

Focus on High-Value Exports – There is a strategic focus on high-value tuna and tuna-like species. These species are identified as a major growth area, particularly for increasing export revenues and strengthening India's position in the global seafood market.

Key Features of the New Regulatory Framework

The draft guidelines introduce a modern, rules-based system for managing India's fishing fleet, aligning it with international standards.

Mandatory Authorisation for High Seas Fishing – No Indian-flagged vessel will be permitted to fish on the High Seas without a Letter of Authorisation (LOA) issued by the government. This LOA will be valid for three years, ensuring periodic review and consistent regulatory oversight of fishing operations.

Combating Illegal Fishing – The framework explicitly prohibits Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. This crucial step aligns India with global fisheries governance standards and demonstrates a commitment to responsible maritime practices.

Compliance with International Norms – Indian vessels are now required to adhere to the conservation and management measures set by Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs). This includes strict compliance with –

1. Catch limits to prevent overfishing.
2. Gear restrictions to minimize ecological damage.
3. Bycatch mitigation techniques to protect non-target species.
4. Proper management of Fish Aggregation Devices (FADs).
5. Mandatory voyage reporting for transparency and data collection.

Empowering Small-Scale Fishers – The guidelines include provisions for training and capacity-building programmes. These initiatives are designed to help small-scale and traditional fishers acquire the skills and technology needed to participate in High Seas fishing and improve their integration into modern value chains.

Strategic Focus – The Island Territories of Andaman & Nicobar and Lakshadweep

These island territories are being developed as strategic hubs for marine resource development due to their extensive EEZs.

Andaman & Nicobar Islands – This archipelago accounts for 6.6 lakh sq km of the EEZ, which is roughly one-third of India's total maritime zone. A dedicated "tuna cluster" has been notified to unlock this potential, featuring –

1. Support for on-board processing and freezing facilities to maintain catch quality.
2. A streamlined process for licensing deep-sea tuna vessels.
3. A single-window clearance system to ease administrative hurdles.

Lakshadweep Islands – These islands command an EEZ of 4 lakh sq km (about 17% of India's total) and a rich lagoon area of 4,200 sq km. Development plans are focused on harnessing opportunities in tuna fisheries, aquaculture, and sustainable lagoon-based fishing systems, positioning the islands as a key center for the blue economy.

Persistent Challenges Facing the Sector

Despite its potential, the fisheries sector faces several significant challenges that need to be addressed.

Resource Imbalance – There is a critical imbalance where nearshore fisheries are overexploited, leading to depleted stocks, while the vast potential of offshore and deep-sea resources remains underutilized.

Barriers for Traditional Fishers – Small-scale fishers often face significant limitations, including a lack of access to modern technology, capital for larger vessels, and the specialized training required for sustainable High Seas fishing.

Infrastructure Deficiencies – Pervasive infrastructure gaps, such as inadequate cold chains, modern harbors, and processing facilities, lead to high post-harvest losses, reduce efficiency, and limit export potential.

Environmental Concerns – Unsustainable practices pose serious ecological risks, including high levels of bycatch, degradation of sensitive coral reef ecosystems, and the use of destructive fishing gear.

Enforcement Gaps – Effective monitoring, control, and surveillance (MCS) against IUU fishing across India's vast EEZ is a major challenge, requiring stronger institutional capacity and technological investment.

Key Government Initiatives Supporting the Sector

The government has launched several schemes to bolster the growth and modernization of the fisheries sector.

Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) – An agency focused on facilitating technology upgrades, developing new markets, and ensuring quality certification for exports.

National Marine Fisheries Action Plan (NMFAP) – A comprehensive plan to improve resource assessment, upgrade infrastructure, and promote aquaculture.

Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) – The flagship scheme (FY 2020-21 to 2024-25) aimed at bringing about a "Blue Revolution" through sustainable and responsible development.

Fisheries and Aquaculture Infrastructure Development Fund (FIDF) – A dedicated fund created to finance the development of modern fisheries infrastructure.

Kisan Credit Card (KCC) – The scheme was extended to fishers in 2018-19 to provide them with access to affordable working capital.

The Way Ahead – A Strategic Roadmap

To fully realize the sector's potential, a focused, multi-pronged approach is necessary.

Strengthening Infrastructure – Prioritize investment in modern harbors, end-to-end cold-chain logistics, and advanced processing facilities to minimize post-harvest losses and boost export competitiveness.

Promoting Value Addition and Exports – Double down on high-value species like tuna by creating robust value chains, encouraging on-board processing, and forging strong linkages with global markets.

Capacity-Building for Fishers – Expand and scale up training and skill development programs to empower traditional and small-scale fishers, ensuring their successful and inclusive participation in the growing deep-sea and High Seas fishing industry.

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