

Suriname: Haven for Smugglers and Illegal Fishers

A Suriname fishmonger in the coastal city of Nieuw Nickerie says he pays 250,000 Surinamese dollars, or about \$12,000, each year for his processing business and fleet.

Saying that it's the only way to recoup costs, the vendor acknowledges an illegal trade in fishing permits. Fishers from neighboring Guyana often work under the licenses, renting them from boat owners for a few thousand dollars.

“I have a permit, you have a boat. I say, ‘take the permit, use the boat, bring me the fish,’” the vendor, whose name is being withheld due to his comments on illicit acts including smuggling, told InSight Crime.

Suriname – wedged among Guyana, French Guiana and Brazil – has [strict laws](#) on fishing licenses, including one that says permits may only be issued to Surinamese vessels and that they are non-transferable. In 2020 the Ministry of Agriculture, Husbandry and Fisheries issued just over [930 artisanal fishing permits](#). Due to the trade in licenses, however, many more boats are fishing in Suriname's waters.

Licenses are readily duplicated, said Satesh Kodai, chairman of the Suriname National Fisherfolk Organization. He estimated that for every 100 permits rented to Guyanese fishers, three to four hundred boats are working under them. He said that Guyanese fishers who illegally rent licenses also duplicate them to sell to their compatriots.

“Even a boat owner is not aware how many times their permits are being copied,” Kodai told InSight Crime.

Fish Smuggled to Guyana

Suriname's artisanal fishers can apply for two types of licenses. An inland navigation license allows for fishing in rivers, including the estuary, and shallow coastal waters. A Suriname Coast license, or SK license for its Dutch acronym, permits fishing in offshore zones in waters up to 16.5 meters deep. In 2020, the inland fleet received some 470 permits and the coastal one 450, according to the latest [fisheries management plan](#).

Boats provided SK licenses are typically large wooden vessels that can stay out to sea for up to three weeks, fishing for tuna, butterfish, Asian sea bass and other large fish.

The more valuable SK licenses are most often rented to Guyanese boats. Guyana news organizations have reported that fishers [pay up to \\$4,000](#) for a permit. These boats also illegally land their catch in Guyana.

Dew Jaddoe, the chief executive officer of a fish processing plant in the coastal municipality of Nickerie and a former fisheries director, said that it is well known, including to the ministry, “that SK boats are smuggling fish.” According to the fisheries plan, about a quarter of SK-licensed boats are landing their catch in Guyana.

“The SK boats need to be checked,” Jaddoe told InSight Crime.

But maritime patrol resources are limited.

“We try to do patrols at least twice a month if we have enough petrol,” Radjoe Bhola, director of the Suriname Coast Guard, told InSight Crime

“Almost every patrol, we bring in one or two illegal boats, sometimes six or seven,” Bhola said. “We come across Guyanese and Venezuelan illegal fishing boats, but most of the violations are actually Surinamese who go fishing without a permit.”

Authorities struggle to catch Guyana fishers using illegal permits, because most who work for Suriname boat owners are Guyanese, said Mohamedsafiek Gowrie, the chairman of the National Assembly’s Committee on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries.

“The Guyanese person fishing in the water doesn’t honestly indicate to the police, ‘I paid a huge amount for this license,’” Gowrie told InSight Crime.

Contraband on the Corentyne River

The mouth of the Corentyne River – near the small city of Nieuw Nickerie -- is cluttered and busy with fishing boats.

A lone small speedboat is all that Major Wim Daal, commander of the National Army’s Western Region, has for patrols. The Nickerie district, which borders the Atlantic Ocean and Corentyne River, lacks even a coast guard station.

“Suriname has a strict fishing policy, but we lack the resources to apply the law,” Daal told InSight Crime.

A brisk smuggling trade occurs along the Corentyne. Illegal gold [is smuggled](#) to Suriname. Clothing, electronics, alcohol, chickens and fuel [are all moved](#) into Guyana.

A business owner on the banks of the Nickerie river who asked for anonymity because of fear of reprisals showed a cellphone video of a group of Guyanese fishers rapidly stripping a pick-up. Dashboard, seats, door, engine, steering wheel and exhaust pipe disappear into the belly of a fishing boat docked near a jetty.

“You would think they’d do something like that at night, quietly. This was the middle of the day. Apparently, they have nothing to fear,” he said.

The businessman has delivered evidence of illegal fishing and smuggling to local officials and national agencies but has been met by a wall of silence.

InSight Crime contacted Suriname’s Ministry of Agriculture, Husbandry and Fisheries numerous times to discuss illegal licenses and smuggling but did not receive a reply.

“On the Corantyne, everything is smuggled,” said the fish vendor. “You have people crossing illegally, smuggling, transit and illegal fishing. It’s common knowledge.”

Much of the contraband is moved in boats designed to look like fishing vessels. “They put a fishing net on the deck, and you start thinking it’s a fishing boat. They even may have a permit,” the fish vendor said.

Western Hemisphere Regional Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Assessment



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