

Japan targets seafood poachers with plan for 'proof of origin'

Major importing country wants certificates for many overfished products.

Japan will require that seafood sold within its borders carry an official proof of origin, as one of the world's leading importers of marine products aims to deter the poaching that has decimated fish populations.

Tokyo's crackdown on illegally caught fish in the marketplace, as well as against poachers in the high seas, follows in the footsteps of the European Union, the U.S. and South Korea.

Despite international fishing quotas and designated catch seasons, poaching arrests by Japanese officials were 30% higher in 2017 compared with two decades earlier. The fisheries ministry will submit legislation for the proof of origin to Japan's parliament as early as 2020 for implementation about two years later.

The domestic fishing industry produced 4.39 million tons of seafood last year, down two-thirds from the peak in 1984. About one-third of global fish stocks had shrunk to unsustainable levels in 2015, Japanese government data shows.

The proof of origin certificates will indicate the fisher, the delivery date and the port from where the seafood was caught.

The documents will be issued for seafood caught legally by members of fishing cooperatives, as well as by operators that have approval from national and local authorities. Marine products lacking the certificates will be prohibited on the market.

The certificates would be issued mainly by the cooperatives, since they are registered with the government. Digital alternatives such as chip tags would be allowed, too. The certificates are expected to be



applied initially to sea cucumbers and abalone, two species prone to poaching.

Certain imported seafood would need certificates issued by the exporting country. The types of marine products covered will be decided later, but likely candidates include squid and saury, since they are at high risk of illegal fishing.

Because Japan ranks as the third-biggest importer of seafood, the new regulations are expected to contribute heavily toward anti-poaching efforts.

The certificates also are intended to alleviate the sense of inequity felt by fishers who play by the rules. It is anticipated that the practice will elevate the brand value of locally harvested fish as well.

"If we don't implement countermeasures in the marketplace, there is no way we can eradicate poaching," said a manager at a fishing cooperative in Iwate Prefecture.

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