

6. Deep-Sea Fishing Rules – Economy

The Government of India has notified new Deep-Sea Fishing Rules, 2025, aimed at realizing the vision of a prosperous and inclusive Blue Economy and unlocking the vast potential of India's 11,099 km coastline and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

New Rules on Deep-Sea Fishing and EEZ Governance in India

1. Context and Background

India, with a coastline of 7,517 km and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of about 2.02 million sq. km, possesses one of the world's richest marine biodiversity zones. However, near-shore fish stocks are depleting due to overfishing, climate change, and destructive fishing methods. To ensure sustainable exploitation of deep-sea resources and to empower traditional fishers, India notified new rules under the Maritime Zones of India (Regulation of Fishing by Foreign Vessels) Act, 1981 and related frameworks. These rules aim to strengthen the "Blue Economy Vision 2047", promote cooperative fishing governance, and reinforce India's maritime sovereignty.

2. Key Highlights of the Rules

A. Empowering Fishermen and Cooperatives

Exclusive Priority – Deep-sea fishing licenses are granted only to Indian Fishermen Cooperative Societies and Fish Farmer Producer Organisations (FFPOs).

Objective – To ensure that economic benefits remain with Indian fishers, especially traditional and small-scale communities.

Capacity Building – Cooperatives are encouraged to adopt modern fishing vessels, cold-chain systems, and digital tracking through government support.

Inclusivity – Promotes community-based fisheries management, aligning with India's cooperative federalism model and Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliance) initiatives.

B. Ban on Foreign Fishing Vessels

Complete Prohibition – Foreign vessels are banned from operating within India's EEZ (up to 200 nautical miles).

Rationale –

1. To protect resource sovereignty and prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.
2. To safeguard livelihoods of small-scale Indian fishers who depend on coastal resources.
3. To curb foreign encroachment and enhance national maritime security.

Strategic Implication – The move strengthens India's control over marine resources, aligning with the UNCLOS (1982) principles on exclusive national rights within the EEZ.

C. Mother-and-Child Vessel Model

Innovation in Deep-Sea Fishing – Introduced a "Mother-and-Child" vessel model for mid-sea operations. A large 'mother' vessel acts as a logistic hub for multiple smaller 'child' fishing boats, enabling on-sea storage, refueling, and catch transshipment.

Benefits – Reduces shore congestion and turnaround time at ports. Allows longer fishing operations in distant waters without frequent returns to shore. Ensures compliance with Reserve Bank of India (RBI) regulations for foreign exchange in transshipment.

Efficiency Gain – Enables real-time cold storage, fuel efficiency, and optimized fish handling, thereby improving export quality and value addition.

D. Prohibition of Harmful Fishing Practices

Banned Methods – LED light fishing, pair trawling, and bull trawling are strictly prohibited.

Environmental Rationale – These methods cause massive bycatch, disrupt juvenile fish populations, and destroy marine benthic ecosystems.

Sustainability Focus – Promotes eco-friendly fishing technologies like selective trawl nets, hook-and-line fishing, and deep-sea longlining.

Alignment with Global Standards – Supports India's compliance with FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water).

E. Fisheries Management and Legal Measures

Minimum Legal Sizes – The government will prescribe minimum legal catch sizes for each commercially important fish species. Aims to prevent juvenile fishing and allow reproductive maturity for stock replenishment.

Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) – To be prepared in consultation with states, coastal UTs, and fishers' associations. FMPs will guide zonal fishing seasons, gear restrictions, and quota-based harvesting for sustainable exploitation.

Legal Enforcement – Strengthens surveillance through the Indian Coast Guard, Fisheries Departments, and satellite-based Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS).

F. Digital Access and Monitoring – ReALCRaft Portal

Online Regulatory System – Mechanized and large motorized vessels must register and obtain free access passes via the ReALCRaft (Registration, Approval, and Licensing of Craft) portal.

Integration – Linked with the Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) and Export Inspection Council (EIC) to track compliance for exports.

Benefits – Enhances traceability of catch, ensuring only legally sourced and Indian-origin seafood enters global markets. Promotes transparency, digital governance, and data-based decision-making in marine resource management.

Significance of the Rules

A. Economic and Developmental Significance – Expands India's deep-sea fishing potential beyond the overexploited near-shore waters. Expected to boost fisheries revenue, increase seafood exports, and reduce import dependence on fishmeal and protein. Empowers coastal communities, improving incomes, skills, and employment in allied sectors (cold chain, logistics, processing).

B. Ecological and Sustainability Significance – Ensures long-term fish stock health through conservation-based management. Helps meet India's climate commitments by promoting low-impact fishing. Supports marine biodiversity preservation under the National Plan of Action for Marine Fisheries (NPOA-MF 2023).

C. Strategic and Security Significance – Strengthens India's presence in the EEZ, deterring illegal fishing by foreign vessels. Enhances maritime domain awareness (MDA), complementing SAGAR Vision (Security and Growth for All in the Region). Aids in blue water surveillance, aligning with India's maritime diplomacy and Indo-Pacific strategic interests.

D. Trade and Export Significance – Ensures traceable, certified Indian-origin seafood – enhancing credibility in global markets. Facilitates compliance with international sanitary and sustainability standards, improving competitiveness in EU, US, and Japan markets.

About India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

Legal Basis – Defined under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which India is a signatory.

Extent – The EEZ extends up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline (low-water line) along India's coast.

Sovereign Rights

India exercises exclusive sovereign rights for –

1. Exploration and exploitation of natural resources (living and non-living).
2. Energy production from water, currents, and wind.
3. Marine research and environmental protection.

Strategic Importance

The EEZ contributes to

1. Marine food security through regulated fishing.
2. Energy security (offshore hydrocarbons, renewables).
3. Maritime surveillance and naval operations.
4. Blue Economy development and coastal resilience.

Challenges Ahead

Implementation hurdles – Need for harmonized coordination between Centre and coastal states.

Technological gap – Limited access to modern vessels and deep-sea fishing infrastructure.

Skill deficit – Fisherfolk need training in sustainable deep-sea fishing techniques.

Data and monitoring challenges – Effective real-time vessel tracking and catch reporting mechanisms must be strengthened.

Market access – Small cooperatives require institutional support to enter high-value export chains.

Way Forward

1. Strengthen regulatory enforcement through coast guard and satellite-based monitoring.
2. Promote blue economy clusters with integrated port, cold chain, and processing facilities.
3. Enhance cooperative credit support and access to subsidized technology.
4. Expand marine research in collaboration with NIOT, CMFRI, and ICAR institutes for sustainable yield assessment.
5. Develop a National Deep-Sea Fishing Mission aligning with SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and India's Blue Economy Policy (2021).

Conclusion

The new fishing rules represent a paradigm shift toward sustainable, cooperative, and technology-driven marine governance. By prioritizing Indian cooperatives, prohibiting foreign vessel operations, and introducing innovative management systems, India is reinforcing both economic sovereignty and ecological responsibility. These reforms will strengthen India's blue economy, maritime security, and global seafood competitiveness, ensuring the long-term sustainability of marine resources and livelihoods of coastal communities.

Source – <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/marine-reform-centre-notifies-new-deep-sea-fishing-rules-bans-foreign-vessels-empowers-cooperatives-what-changes-for-indian-fishers/articleshow/125185078.cms>

