

Book Review: “Outlaw Ocean: Crime & Survival in the Last Untamed Frontier”

Ian Urbina

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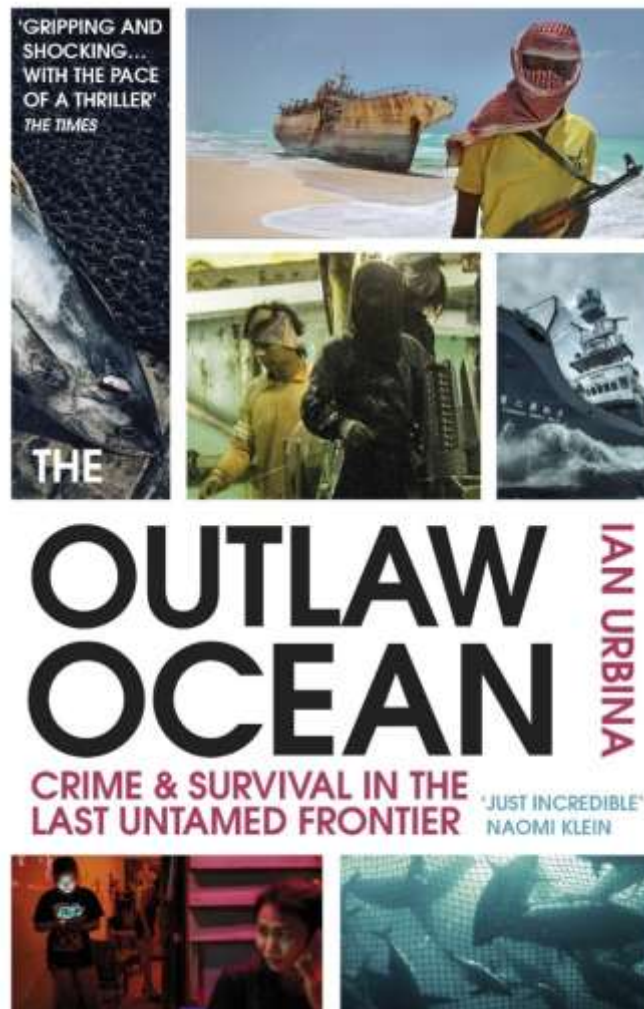
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Ian Urbina is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the New York Times, who spent five years, more than three of them, at sea, investigating, compiling and writing this revealing, fascinating and disturbing book.

Some months ago, I listened to a podcast on mostly naval matters, the principal guest was Prof. Geoffrey Till, a renowned expert of naval and maritime warfare. At the end of the podcast the presenter asked Till for a book recommendation. Expecting, an erudite volume to be named, I was encouraged to hear him urge listeners to read a grittier more confronting book, Ian Urbina's "Outlaw Ocean". Till described the book as an important revelation about other nefarious activities and crimes that occur at sea that could cause chaos for the commercial shipping industry, and if not managed could cause chaos for governments and their navies.

Having been the co-founder and CEO of the Security Association for the Maritime Industry (SAMI), our organisation interacted with Ian Urbina on several occasions, and we always found him to be a journalist of integrity with a hunger for the truth behind the story.

From the outset this book is a gritty, expose without being sensationalist. It is disquieting and credible, written in the very matter of fact style of an experienced journalist with the ability to describe the depravity of situations he observes and experiences whilst capturing the ludicrousness of the scenarios and incidents recounted. Urbina delves into the murky and dark side of activities conducted at sea, out of sight and for many governments, conveniently out of mind and beyond jurisdictional responsibility. Unlike many books written by academics about maritime crime and security, the author had immersed himself in these uncomfortable environments often putting himself at risk. Urbina has shone a light into the dark corners, that for many are invisible, or conveniently ignored part of the maritime industry and revealed harsh realities of what can and does happen at sea.

The book comprises fifteen chapters, each is meticulously researched and often experienced by the author, identifying the categories of unlawfulness conducted at sea and in the ports, harbours around the globe. There is often linkage between the chapters in the types of criminal activity that adds granularity to the backdrop of illegal activities across the maritime industry. Urbina also finishes each chapter with his reflections along with some thoughts on the challenges of reining in the lawlessness. The level of research is demonstrated in the 84 pages of detailed notes along with ten pages of further reading suggestions for those who have an interest in the subjects covered. Each chapter includes inset grainy and often atmospheric black and white photographs and illustrations, adding valuable visual dimensions to the detailed descriptions. There are also 18 colour photographs, which are excellent, but almost seem out of place with the mood of the book.

Urbina's confronting introduction is designed to prepare the landlubber for a trip across an ocean that holds unexpected adventures where the reader will meet "vigilante conservationists, wreck thieves, maritime mercenaries, defiant whalers, offshore repo[session] men, a seaborne abortion clinic, clandestine oil dumpers, elusive poachers, abandoned seafarers and cast-adrift stowaways." In a world that is "largely invisible to anyone leading a landlocked lifestyle." Where he suggests the ocean "is a metaphor for infinity and a place of the purest form of freedom, distinctly divorced from government meddling."

Chapter 1 takes the reader to sea onboard Sea Shepherd's ship *Bob Barker* with Captain Peter Hammarstedt in the frigid Southern Ocean, chasing a specific vessel involved in illegal unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing¹. Most people with an interest in maritime crime and security will have heard

¹ IUU fishing IUU fishing encompasses three main categories: illegal fishing, which violates national laws or international obligations; unreported fishing, which is not reported or is misreported to relevant authorities; and unregulated fishing, which

of the organisation *Sea Shepherd* and are likely to have a range of opinions. *Sea Shepherd* is a not-for-profit marine conservation, activism organisation, that uses direct action tactics to achieve their goals. Their founder, Paul Watson, was ousted from Greenpeace in 1977, because of disagreements over his direct-action activism tactics, which clashed with their less confrontational nature of Greenpeace. The organisation, initially called “Earth Force Society” acquired their first vessel *Sea Shepherd* in 1978 with a donation from Funds for Animals. The organisations first direct action was against Canadian Seal Hunting, followed by the *Sea Shepherd* ramming the notorious Portuguese unregulated whaling vessel *Sierra*, which resulted in the scuttling of *Sea Shepherd*. *Sea Shepherd* the organisation, with its fleet of vessels, were involved in a range of activities, sometimes controversially, against vessels from many different countries. In 2016 *Sea Shepherd* started to cooperate with national governments assisting in maritime anti-poaching and protecting marine reserves. The Japanese declared *Sea Shepherd* and “eco-terrorist” in 2017, for preventing them whaling and therefore “impeding their research”. In 2022 there was a schism between *Sea Shepherd* the organisation and their founder Paul Watson, because he thought they were moving away from their direct-action principles. The organisation split to *Sea Shepherd Origins*, which continues with a more direct-action modus operandi and *Sea Shepherd Global* that is more aligned with nations and conventional protests.

The reader joins the *Bob Barker* in the rough Southern Ocean, chasing one of Interpol’s Purple Listed IUU fishing boats, *Thunder*, a Nigerian flagged vessel. Urbina uses the period of the pursuit to provide large amounts of background information about IUU fishing and the failure of States to control this destructive process, with accounts following the fish from capture to consumption at tables in some of the world’s most fashionable restaurants. The protracted and interrupted chase is interspersed with other accounts of similar stories from around the globe. before the story come to an unexpected conclusion. This first chapter serves to describe the vagaries and complexities of IUU fishing and demonstrates quite how difficult it is to manage the 4.5 million fishing vessels as they ply their trade across over 70 per cent of the surface of the planet.

The second chapter focuses on the plight of the of the small Pacific Island nation Palau, which sits about 500nm east of the Philippine Island Mindanao and 500nm north of New Guinea, part of the Federated State of Micronesia. And whilst Palau “consists of only about 177 square miles of land (roughly the size of New York City), its sovereignty [Exclusive Economic Zone – EEZ] extends across 230,000 square miles of wide-open seas (nearly the size of Texas).” Its physical isolation and geographic position make it a very attractive spot for a range of valuable fish to catch from Pacific Bluefin Tuna (which can sell for around USD 1 million) it is a haven for sharks and other Chinese delicacies like Sea Cucumbers. Consequently, it is well known by poachers who conduct very profitable IUU fishing. Like so many developing countries, where the EEZ is greater in size than the land mass². The challenge for Palau is how to police this massive bounteous sea area with only one coastguard vessel. Whilst Palau fights on valiantly to enforce its EEZ, the fishermen find it all too easy to evade the law and exploit Palau’s valuable resources for free. Chapter Three describes how a former British Army Officer called Paddy Roy Bates, slightly eccentric, acquired one of the wartime anti-aircraft forts located in the North Sea, seven miles off the English coastline.

occurs in areas or for stocks without applicable conservation measures or in ways inconsistent with state responsibilities for marine resource conservation (FAO). It occurs globally, both in national waters and on the high seas, and can involve organized crime networks. IUU fishing is a complex global challenge with ecological, economic, and security dimensions.

Combating it requires coordinated international action, robust national policies, technological monitoring, and sustainable management practices to protect marine resources, ensure food security, and support the livelihoods of responsible fishers.

² For example, 37 per cent of the 32 sub-Saharan African countries have a larger EEZ than landmass.

He declared the fort was the new nation of *Sealand* with the motto *E Mare, Libertas* or “From the Sea Freedom”. The trials and tribulations of *Sealand* its ownership and occupation, along with the fantastical and entertaining saga of the situation reinforce some of the unique aspects of maritime law.

The fourth chapter explores the ins and outs of “scofflaw” – a person who flouts the law, especially by failing to comply with a law that is difficult to enforce effectively. Urbina focuses on a small fleet of Korean fishing ships that practice “scofflaw” to an unbelievable level. He describes how a Korean fleet of large factory fishing vessels are used to fish the waters around New Zealand. The ships are in an appalling state of repair and dangerously unseaworthy. The vessels are skippered by a list of dubious Korean characters that are treacherously incompetent and often drunk. The crew, who are nationals from nations like Indonesia, are worked relentlessly in appalling conditions. The ship’s officers push them extremely hard, exceeding all accepted working conditions of health and safety, often for 24-hours plus, without breaks, food or rest onboard a ship in foul weather. After enduring these conditions, the crew is likely to lose significant proportions of their salary to pay for very basic accommodation and food which is meagre and often disgusting. Despite the blatant breaches of all forms of acceptable conditions for the crew the likelihood of the vessel owner his captain or officers being held to account is extraordinarily slim. Conditions at home for the crew means they are unlikely to provide statements that will allow authorities to judicially process those responsible.

Chapter 5, “Adelaide’s Voyage” delves into another way in which the ambiguities of the law of the sea allows women the opportunity to reclaim their lives. Rebecca Gomperts, a Dutch Doctor, who founded “Women on Waves” (<https://www.womenonwaves.org/>), onboard the *Adelaide* a fractional sloop sailing boat to “traverses the globe, in a converted medical ship carrying an international team of volunteer doctors that provide abortions in places where it has been criminalised.” The operations are conducted 13 miles offshore (outside the Territorial Waters and therefore not within the jurisdiction of the coastal State). Gomperts uses “maritime law as a kind of secret weapon” – she says “we don’t break the law” ... “We are simply and creatively “leveraging the law to provide “harm reduction”. For some, this is a controversial subject but, according to the World Health Organization, there are more than 20 million women annually that have unsafe abortions and around forty-seven thousand die, because of the way the procedure is conducted. This account is an example of a loophole maritime law being used in a merciful way.

Chapter 6 looks at the very old maritime crime of stowaways. The definition of a *stowaway* is someone who “hides onboard a ship ... to get free passage.” Whilst the image of a stowaway may have a mythical or romantic aura about it, the realities can be breathtakingly brutal. Urbina discovers that this crime has often been resolved by either casting the stowaways adrift on rafts or getting them to effectively *walk the plank*, with little chance of them living to tell the tale. The penalty for surrendering a stowaway discovered during a trip can easily run up to \$50,000 or more if the ship is held in port and the cargo is delayed. However, there are also *professional* stowaways who play the game taking advantage of their situation, blackmailing the captain of the ship, claiming they have been mistreated resulting in an investigation by port authorities, which delays the ship in port, costing the ship owner millions of dollars because of the late arrival of cargo. Urbina then takes his investigations deeper, looking at how crews are treated aboard some ships and deduces “The unfortunate truth was that in much of the maritime world the law protects the ship’s cargo better than its crew.”

Chapter 7 finds one of the industries many characters; Max Hardberger, a short man with the physique of a marathon runner who lives simply in Mississippi and repossess ships globally. As Urbina discovers “tens of thousands of vessels, from miniscule to massive, are stolen around the world each year.” Finding them and recovering them takes a certain kind of person, with an interesting set of skills and sometimes a “flexible outlook on the law” with fascinating and intriguing accounts of how things are done.

Chapter 8 delves into the murky world of crew manning agencies. Most of the 56 million fishermen³ and 1.6 million seafarers who crew ships are provided by manning agencies, alleviating the ship owner of this time-consuming administrative burden. Most seafarers come from developing nations and few of them are aware of their rights, let alone demanding them. The opportunities for abuse and exploitation are multiple, and incidents are numerous if you know where to look. Some of the accounts are breathtaking in their audacity.

Chapter 9 – The Next Frontier looks below the surface of the oceans and examines some of the “immense voids – literal and legal” that exist in our oceans. This subject has gained recent media attention when on Thursday 24 April 2025, US President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order aimed at boosting the undersea mining industry, despite the International Seabed Authority (ISA) not having released its guidance on what should and should not be mined, taken, cleared from the deepest depths of the ocean. It was another Republican President, Ronald Reagan, who in 1982 when justifying the US not becoming signatories of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), stated “the deep seabed mining part of the convention does not meet United States objectives.” He went on to say, “The aim of the United States in this regard has been to establish with other nations an order that would allow exploration and development under reasonable terms and conditions.” The chapter examines this dilemma from several perspectives and highlights how little we understand about the deep ocean and that destroying the fragile natural balance for personal financial short-term gain could cause unknown irreparable damage.

Chapter 10 looks at Sea Slavery, largely conducted on some of the 4 million plus fishing vessels that ply the seas. Urbina’s personal accounts are particularly vivid after his experiences of visiting some of these fishing vessels; “The relentless gut-punch reality for me, though, was how completely the framework of a civilised society was abandoned at sea, especially on fishing boats on the South China Sea.” He believes it is a “global blind spot, because governments, companies and consumers either don’t know it occurs or when they do, prefer to look the other way.

Chapter 11 reflects on the way some ships within the cruise industry (one of the fastest areas of growth in global tourism) and other industries exploit being out of sight and therefore out of mind and above all, out of jurisdictional stewardship so they can ditch, into the sea, what they don’t want. Whilst cruise ships and platforms are easy targets, many coastal and riverine nations pump raw sewerage and chemical waste into the vastness of the sea. Urbina comments that the “cruise industry reminded me that crime – whether at sea or otherwise – can be found behind even the most polished of facades.”

Chapter 12 examines the way in which the demarcation of maritime boundaries can be almost futile with limited viability and are often impossible to enforce. While borders on land are normally defined by a visible feature (river, ridgeline or human barrier), there are no lines drawn across the oceans, making them indeterminate, open to interpretation and abuse. For adjacent coastal States the boundary of their territorial waters, contiguous zone and exclusive economic zones all have to be negotiated and if there is a valuable resource either in the sea or under the seabed, these are often contested, sometimes bitterly⁴. The waters of the South China Sea are contested by all the littoral nations, meanwhile seafood is a significant protein element of most countries diets and fish completely ignore borders. Tensions are high and conflict at varying degrees is a regular occurrence. The complexities are numerous as this chapter vividly describes, emphasising the challenges that exist.

Chapter 13 examines the use of firearms at sea. Urbina starts by recalling an extremely sinister and infamous fuzzy video clip that first appeared on YouTube in 2014. The clip shows a small number of Asian

³ It is estimated there are more than 4 million fishing vessels globally from small coastal fishing boats to massive industrial fishing vessels that often process their catch as well.

⁴ It is estimated there are almost 200 ongoing maritime boundary disputes globally.

men in the sea, holding onto pieces of wooden wreckage, being shot at by other people from the boat where the incident is being filmed with a smartphone. It is a harrowing piece of footage that sparked hundreds of accusations of who was doing what; most of them were baseless and unfounded. Urbina spends the chapter chasing down a plausible account. He also uses this chapter to look at the challenges of having armed guards embarked on ships to deter pirates. He briefly describes some of the potential problems that could and have occurred on floating armouries⁵. He also discovered that most governments dealing with incidents of armed men at sea typically focus on avoiding any responsibility rather than finding the culprit and taking them to justice.

Chapter 14 looks at the dilemma faced by Somalia and the challenges it faces to enforce some kind of maritime security within its massive EEZ. Somali has the longest coastline in the continent of Africa. Somalis are traditionally agrarian cattle herders not fishermen, the country is ranked lowest in terms of seafood consumption. However, the waters of its EEZ are seasonally rich with extremely lucrative tuna and other migratory fish. Illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing by foreign national fishing fleets steal millions of dollars of potential income. Smugglers take contraband like charcoal and Khat across the Gulf of Aden to the Arabian Peninsula to feed the ravenous black market, denuding Somalia of income. Whilst criminals have almost complete freedom of movement along the coast to conduct nefarious activities. For a nation attempting to establish itself, having a lawless ocean as its eastern and northern borders with several regional governments chronically corrupt and complicit with the criminal activities, it almost impossible for Somalia attain the stability required for nation building.

The final chapter returns to the activities of Sea Shepherd and the persistence of Japan and other nations like Norway, South Korea and Denmark that continue whaling in the world's oceans. According to the International Whaling Commission almost 2,000 whales were killed in 2024, of those, 1,249 were killed illegally, under objection or commercially, whilst the remaining animals were taken as part of agreements or Aboriginal subsistence catches⁶. In addition to act of harpooning whales, it is the mass industrialisation of catching Krill, the staple diet of most whales, penguins and seals that inhabit the Antarctic. The Antarctic Krill is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, protein and antioxidants, making it a popular dietary supplement for our obese societies. The irony being that as we have protected the whales and their numbers are recovering; we are now destroying the Antarctic eco system by subtracting the keystone food that supports the entire food web of the Southern Ocean.

The book finishes with an epilogue in which Urbina makes several salient points; there is but one ocean, where impunity is the norm and enforcement a rarity. Coastal nations seem to prioritise commercial security over crime prevention, allowing some of the worst instincts of our human species thrive and flourish. The Appendix suggests we need to protect our mariners better, have a more transparent food chain, along with monitoring and investigating offshore crimes. There are 84 pages stacked with comprehensive notes, 10 pages of suggested further reading and an extensive 33-page index and two pages of illustrations credits.

In addition to the book Ian Urbina runs the Outlaw Ocean Project, which includes a very good and regularly updated website <https://theoutlawocean.com/> which has a wealth of more recent material including videos and podcasts covering subjects from the book and new stories.

This book is an important addition to the growing body of academic literature being published on maritime security. Urbina's unquenchable curiosity and irrepressible determination to investigate the evidence of dubious maritime behaviour and unquestionable criminal activity makes his work invaluable,

⁵ Floating Armouries were used by private maritime security companies around the four corners of the NW Indian Ocean to position ships (normally old rig support vessels) to act as armouries and "floatels" for private armed guards between voyages

⁶ <https://iwc.int/management-and-conservation/whaling/total-catches>

providing the gritty, authentic and often unpalatable side of the life at sea for many unfortunate people. All students of maritime security should read this book and visit the website.