Stories covering the piracy off the coast of Somalia frequently mention the estimated 80 million dollars that shipping companies have paid out in ransom over the past year to secure the return of the crews and cargo of hijacked ships. A number that is not frequently mentioned however, is the estimated 300 million dollars worth of fish that are illegally poached by European and Asian fishing vessels from Somali shores on an annual basis. Another key factor that is rarely mentioned is the fact that in addition to illegally fishing off the Somali coast, large foreign fishing vessels from European and Asian nations have been using internationally banned equipment that has caused ecological damage and lowered the amount of fish available for local Somali fisherman.

Foreign vessels have also been guilty of illegally dumping toxic waste in the area, polluting the water and causing the illnesses of Somali children. As a result of these illegal acts in the territorial waters of Somalia the livelihood of many Somali fishermen has been destroyed. This reality combined with the fact that Somalia doesn’t have an effective coast guard to protect its shores, and a central government to enforce law and order is the true root cause of piracy in the area.

Despite the fact that the root causes of the piracy off the coast of Somalia can be traced to legitimate grievances, in recent years the attacks have gotten out of hand. Instead of serving as ad-hoc coast guards working to prevent the pillaging of their coast as they have claimed, pirates have been indiscriminately attacking foreign vessels hundreds of miles away from the coast and holding their cargo and crews hostage strictly for ransom money. This has threatened international shipping lanes and drawn the attention of major trading nations around the world. Several analysts have suggested having a robust international naval presence in the region to ensure the safe passage of vessels. Other analysts have stated that the true solution to the issue of piracy off the coast of Somalia lies on land and have
advocated providing support to the Somali transitional federal government and donating food aid to alleviate the poverty in the area. While both of these suggestions are components of a potential solution to the problem of piracy additional steps will need to be taken to put an end to the piracy in the region. A major step that can be taken is forming an effective partnership with the government in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland where the majority of pirated vessels are brought to port in the city of Eyl. The President of Puntland, Abdirahman Mohamed Farole, recently appealed to the international community for aid to help fund the fight against piracy. Providing aid and technical assistance to the government of Puntland to help protect its coast from illegal fishing and dumping, and to arrest and prosecute those involved in piracy could be a major step in the fight against piracy. Other factors such as providing assistance to the transitional federal government in Mogadishu and continued development efforts aimed at poverty alleviation could also be beneficial in the fight against piracy. Overall, only a comprehensive effort by the Somali government and various international actors to address the root causes of piracy and prosecute those involved in both acts of piracy as well as illegal fishing and dumping will put an end to the piracy off the Somali coast.