

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • March 2024 • Vol. 22 • No. 3

FOCUS: Fish is a significant source of protein enjoyed by many people globally. This issue looks at how child labor and human trafficking taints fish and fish products.

Being disconnected from where our food comes from can leave us unaware of how human trafficking and child and forced labor are part of providing what is on our plate. This is especially true when it comes to the fish we eat.

In the United States, where over 60 percent of the fish is imported, we eat twice as much fish as we did 50 years ago. At the same time, seafood stocks are being overfished globally, and it is estimated that the seafood population may be completely depleted by 2048. Fishing rigs must travel farther and fish longer, incentivizing illegal activity to continue making money. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that 128,000 fishers are trapped in child or forced labor aboard fishing vessels worldwide, often far from shore.

Forced labor in fisheries is driven by the motivation to reduce costs amid diminishing profits as the industry tries to meet the worldwide demand for seafood.

Distant water fishing can lead to abusive labor practices. Often, the crews are forced to fish far from shore, making it much easier to exploit them. The laborers may have no idea where they are or hope of escaping to a distant shore. The demand for fish is so high that some governments are ignoring human trafficking and labor exploitation in the fishing industry.

Recruitment

Often, a fishing company will approach a poor community, and the men and boys are promised high wages for labor on a ship. Once on the boat, they work 20-hour days in crowded, inhumane conditions, with limited food, breaks, and sleep. If they complain, they may be tortured or thrown overboard.

Pay and passports are often withheld once a voyage has been completed. However, many vessels transship the fish onto smaller ships and remain at sea for months or years. There are reports of children tossed overboard before arriving at the port and victims thrown overboard when sick or injured. Crew that fall overboard are sometimes not rescued. When no longer in use, vessels and crew may be abandoned, leaving the crew stranded.

Moreover, as fishermen pass through multiple criminal jurisdictions, prosecuting anyone for the crime of human trafficking can be difficult.





Awareness

Fishing Identified as One of the Worst Forms of Child Labor

The International Labor Organization (ILO) identifies fishing as a highly hazardous sector. According to [Verite](#), fishers face dangerous work conditions, including rough weather, slippery/moving work surfaces, regular use of knives/other sharp objects, inadequate sleeping quarters, inadequate sanitation, and lack of fresh food/water. The work itself is labor-intensive. Workers may be required to work around the clock for days without breaks when setting nets or hauling a catch. Workers report high fatigue, which further increases the risk of accidents. Capture fisheries, in particular, have one of the highest occupational fatality rates in the world.

Workers aboard fishing vessels are naturally isolated, particularly on larger ships that can stay at sea for extended periods, leaving workers with limited means of escape or avenues to report abuse.

Fish processing, which can occur on board larger vessels or in port cities, carries risks. For example, workers who pack fish on ice often report frostbite symptoms in their fingers.

Due to the highly hazardous nature of the work, fishing is listed as the worst form of child labor. Fish/seafood products are produced with child labor in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.

According to the [Global Slavery Index](#), 20 fishing countries account for over 80% of the catch worldwide. Of these countries, labor rights violations are most likely to occur in:

- China
- Japan
- Russia
- Spain
- South Korea
- Taiwan
- Thailand

These countries are deemed high risk due to the large number of fish caught outside their waters. When boats are prone to fishing foreign water, they are usually trying to get away with poor labor practices.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

IUU Fishing

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing represents over 20% of the global supply chain, which results in an estimated \$10-23.5 billion (US Dollars) loss to the global economy each year.

Fishing vessels engaged in IUU fishing often engage in exploitation, forced labor, debt bondage, and human trafficking. Crews can be trapped at sea for months or years, and wages are withheld or never paid. These fishing vessels are usually old and poorly maintained with little or no safety features since they are surrendered if caught and so are treated as disposable.

Leading seafood businesses, including [SeaBOS](#), the ten largest seafood companies, the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, representing 70% of the canned tuna industry, and the Global Tuna Alliance, have formed a coalition to address IUU.

The Supply Chain Risk Project (SCRCP) focuses on enabling actionable due diligence through the aggregation and automation of multiple sources of data. The SCRCP aims to provide vessel-level information to inform companies' risk assessment process. Please click [here](#) for more details.

Poor Regulations

In the United States, strict regulations help avert excessive labor and poor and unsafe working conditions. However, many countries have much looser labor laws.

With increasing demand, fishing rigs need to travel farther and fish longer, which results in cutting corners and incentives for illegal activity to maintain a profit. Slim profit margins and known fixed costs for vessel maintenance, fuel, and gear drive commercial fisheries to cut the only factor within their control: wages.

Distant water fishing can lead to abusive labor practices. Since crews are forced to fish so far from the shore, exploiting the workers is much easier. Fishing vessels offload their catch onto refrigerated cargo vessels on the high seas, avoiding the inspectors who might witness human rights abuses.

Governments in the countries that source most of the world's seafood may lack the resources to regulate large-scale fishing activities. Much of the fishing is unreported since it occurs in remote waters where there is no oversight.

In many circumstances, including those involving migrant workers on U.S.-flagged tuna vessels fishing out of Honolulu, fishers are forced to surrender their passports, giving them no option to leave the ship; stepping off the ship subjects workers to deportation and associated charges. For more information, please click [here](#).

Volta

In the 1960s, the Volta Dam was constructed in Ghana, which created Lake Volta, the fourth-largest aquatic reservoir in the world. There are over 1200 rural fishing villages along the lake, most inhabited by impoverished people, many working in the fishing industry. It is estimated that this includes over 20,000 children working in forced and hazardous labor. Most of these children are obtained from parents or other relatives.

Children as young as five are sold and made to work as fishermen for up to 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

Many fishermen on Lake Volta have noticed, due to overfishing, a drop in the fish population in the lake, which creates a decline in the lake's profitability. The fishermen need to continue to bring an adequate number of fish despite the depletion of fish stocks, and children are seen as an easy and economical solution.

Many of the dangerous conditions that these children are exposed to, including physical and sexual abuse, lead to various forms of mental trauma or PTSD. Trauma is common among trafficked victims, which will affect them mentally and emotionally after the trafficking ends.

Children can untether and mend nets because of their tiny fingers. Many children drown when forced to dive under the water to untangle fishing nets. When their bodies wash up onshore, the locals do not report them because they feel law enforcement is worthless. Law enforcement is aware of trafficking on the lake but considers it unsurmountable. When they do see a dead body, they declare the death as natural instead of pressing charges against the trafficker. This inadequate effort of law enforcement to intervene allows trafficking to continue.

According to the [U.S. Department of State](#), children working in or around the lake are "victims of forced labor, not allowed to attend school, given inadequate housing and clothing, and controlled by fishermen through intimidation, violence, and limited access to food."

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Uyghur Forced Labor

A recent report from The Outlaw Ocean Project found that much of the seafood being imported from China by the United States and Europe is processed by Uyghur-forced workers. The fish includes an estimated 50% of fish sticks served in public schools in the United States, and much of the fish served on military bases and veterans' homes, paid for by federal and state tax dollars.

Uyghur workers also process the fish sold at Costco, Kroger, and Walmart. In addition, fish caught in United States waters are often sent to China for processing, which is done by Uyghur forced labor.

Meanwhile, the United States has laws prohibiting importing products using Uyghur labor.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Thailand

About a decade ago, a series of reports revealed human trafficking and exploitation prevalent in Thailand's fishing industry. In 2015, the European Union issued Thailand a "yellow card" indicating illegalities, such as weak labor protections and oversight and human trafficking in the fishing industry, which could lead to a complete ban on imports of Thai seafood.

Changes were made; Thailand also became the first country in Asia to ratify the International Work in Fishing Convention, and in 2019, the EU lifted the warning.

However, in 2021, Thailand, in addition to Taiwan and China, was considered one of the worst performers according to an index produced by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Fish Production

Verite has identified the following factors that contribute to vulnerability to human trafficking in the fishing industry.

Decrease in Fish Stock

For some years, concern has been raised about the coming scarcity of fish due to IUU overfishing. IUU fishers disregard conservation and management measures and don't report their catch, undermining national and regional efforts to manage fisheries sustainably. IUU fishing can lead to the collapse of local fisheries, with small-scale fisheries in developing countries proving particularly vulnerable—threatening livelihoods and exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. Transshipment and the use of reefers are central to many illegal fishing practices, allowing fishing vessels to remain at sea for long periods, causing further ecological degradation and without port state oversight.

Association with Organized Crime/Armed Conflict

IUU fishing has been linked to other forms of organized crime. IUU fishing vessels have also been associated with drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking, child labor, forced labor, and tax evasion. Criminal networks also utilize the proceeds from illegal commercial fishing to finance other illicit activities.

International fishing shipments have also provided a convenient channel for illegal drug trafficking schemes. Cocaine has been placed on local fishing vessels and transported to Europe, and a [UNODC 2021 report](#) highlighted the increasing amount of cocaine seizures in West Africa.

In some cases, terrorist groups provide "protection" for illegal fishing vessels as a source of income. In 2020, the International Chamber of Commerce reported that pirate gangs controlled the Gulf of Guinea.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Ethically Sourced Fish

One way to support change in the fishing industry is by committing to buying ethically sourced fish. There are guides available from [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#) and from the [Marine Conservation Society](#). Both give insight into finding sustainably, ethically sourced fish.

Import Bans

In recent years, governments have enacted import bans to pressure companies to improve fishing sector regulations and address human rights abuses in the industry.

The United States and Canadian governments have attempted to prevent seafood produced with forced or child labor from reaching their markets through existing bans on the importation of goods produced by forced labor.

This passes responsibility to importers to ensure the goods they bring into the country are at low risk of being produced with forced labor. The importers face financial loss if the goods are seized by border patrol.

In 2021, the United States used Withhold Release Orders (WROs) for the first time. The import of goods produced by an entire fishing fleet, the Chinese company Dalian Ocean Fishing Co., was denied based on reports of forced labor. As of September 2022, four fishing vessels flagged to Fiji, Taiwan, and Vanuatu had active WROs against them.

In 2020, Canada introduced measures under the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement Implementation Act to prevent the import of goods produced wholly or partly by forced labor. Similar legislation has been proposed in Australia and the EU.

More evidence is needed to determine the long-term effectiveness of import bans in stopping forced labor in supply chains.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RMFOs)

Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) are international bodies established by treaties under which member states agree to collaborate in sustainably managing specific straddling, highly migratory, or high-seas fish stocks.

An RFMO covers a specific geographic area and, in most cases, particular fisheries. Through it, its members collect data, provide scientific advice, undertake collaborative research, and adopt binding fisheries conservation and enforcement measures, including joint monitoring and surveillance schemes.

All of the world's ocean areas are covered by at least one RFMO, except the Central Arctic Ocean. The U.S. is a member of nine RFMOs, as well as two bilateral U.S.-Canada agreements that function in similar ways.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

In November 2023, Politico published [an article](#) linking Uyghur slave labor to many fish found in grocery stores and restaurants in the United States. Seafood imports from China have slipped by customs, partly because the seafood processing plants are located far from the sea.

The Chinese government forced thousands of Uyghur workers into the plants. Several U.S. companies rely on self-reported catch certificates and independent processing plant audits that lack verification mechanisms. The catch certificates, often filled out at the processing stage, offer a convenient but unreliable account of the seafood's journey. This may explain why the United States Government is not abiding by legislation banning the importation of forced labor products.

The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, enacted in 2021, aims to prevent goods produced with forced labor from entering the U.S. However, federal agencies continue to import millions of dollars of seafood linked to Uyghur and North Korean forced labor.

Action

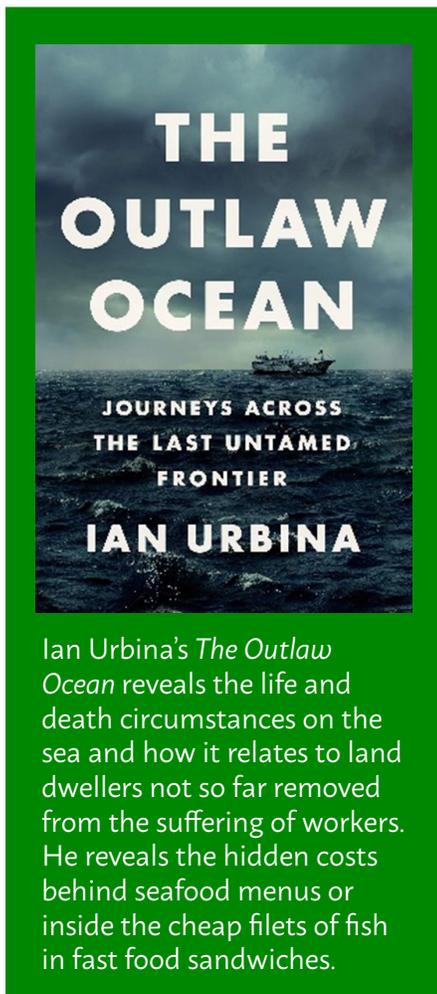
Seabound: The Journey to Modern Slavery

Overexploitation of coastal water resources and dwindling fish populations compel the fishing industry to increase fishing efforts on the high seas, which often results in illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. To sustain it, the industry often depends on a reliable workforce of cheap labor - mostly poor migrant fishers in Southeast Asia. Through direct interviews, paper trail, and corroborative information, *Seabound: The Journey to Modern Slavery* reveals a shady system of recruitment and how migrant fishers are unjustly paid. Please click [here](#) to view this short YouTube video produced by Greenpeace.

In Chains: Forced Labor & Human Trafficking in Fisheries

This 30-minute podcast by Prof. Vasco Becker-Weinberg from the NOVA School of Law, Lisbon, Portugal, and author of “Time to Get Serious about Combating Forced Labour and Human Trafficking in Fisheries,” speaks on human trafficking in fisheries and how this impacts each of us as consumers. Professor Becker-Weinberg also addresses consumer responsibility and the trafficking of women and girls involved in fish processing.

Please click [here](#) to view this podcast.



Ian Urbina's *The Outlaw Ocean* reveals the life and death circumstances on the sea and how it relates to land dwellers not so far removed from the suffering of workers. He reveals the hidden costs behind seafood menus or inside the cheap filets of fish in fast food sandwiches.

Children on Lake Volta

Poverty has forced children in many parts of the world to work, but in the West African nation of Ghana, the fishing industry is using child trafficking to find cheap labor. CBS News foreign correspondent Debora Patta reports and joins CBSN to discuss instances of human trafficking hiding in plain sight. Please click [here](#) to view this 12 minute video.

Seafood Products Made With Forced Labor

The Outlaw Ocean Project spent four years investigating human rights abuses at sea and on land in the Chinese seafood industry, culminating in a report published last month that detailed how the issues overseas touch the fish that often ends up on dinner plates in New Jersey and around the nation.

Please click [here](#) to view this November 2023 news story with Ian Urbina from the Outlaw Ocean Project.

Blood Seafood: Human Trafficking and Slavery at Sea

This is an excellent 12 minute video on human trafficking and the seafood industry. Please click [here](#) to view.



Solidarity with Seafarers

Join the Justice for Immigrants Postcard Campaign: Please join the Labeling for Lent Campaign by sending postcards to The Kroger Co. and Whole Foods Market and ask for change in ensuring policies, procedures and products are not tainted with slave labor. Postcards are available for download [here](#). All you need to do is fill out your information, post a stamp, and drop them in the mail.

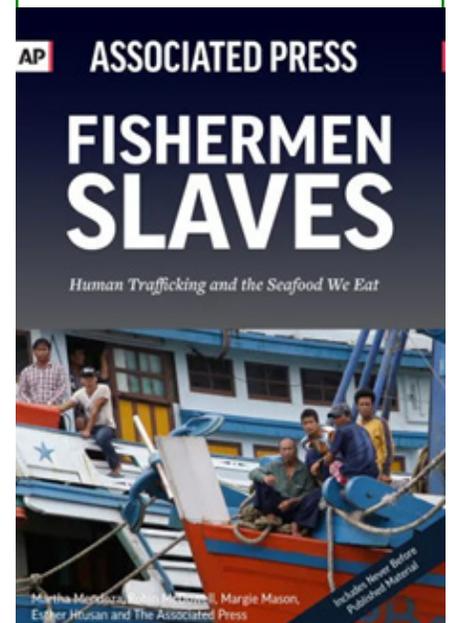
Task Force on Human Trafficking in Fishing in International Waters: Report to Congress

Due to ongoing concerns over human trafficking in the fishing industry, Congress directed the Department of Justice to study the legal issues and make recommendations for legislative action. Their report was published in January 2021. It examines the legal and regulatory authority of the United States government to prevent and respond to human trafficking and vessels from other countries in international waters.

This report may be accessed [here](#).

Fishermen Slaves: Human Trafficking and the Seafood We Eat

In "Fishermen Slaves: Human Trafficking and the Seafood We Eat," the Associated Press explores human exploitation, forced labor, and trafficking in regions ranging from Southeast Asia to the United States. Rooted in religion, discrimination, and poverty, AP journalists unveil a world of desperation and profit, often with little hope of escape. These are the stories of the oppressed worldwide, as told through AP reports and photographs.





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