



Seafood should not be fishy – Ending illegal fishing and forced labour in seafood production

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On 22 May 1787, twelve devout men assembled at a printing shop in the City of London. Most were Quakers, but they were joined by several Anglicans, including the veteran anti-slavery campaigner, Granville Sharp, and the young Thomas Clarkson, who would devote his entire life to the cause. The twelve established themselves as the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and they recruited a young Yorkshire MP, William Wilberforce, to lead the campaign in the House of Commons. While significant progress in abolishing slavery has been made, their dream remains unfulfilled.

Talk of the abuses of slavery! Humbug! The thing itself is the essence of all abuse!
Harriet Beecher Stowe, US Christian abolitionist and author

Modern slavery remains a significant global problem. It persists in the seafood industry, particularly on some fishing vessels that catch seafood for importation into Australia.

There is also a problem with Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) seafood production. IUU fishing is a crucial contributor to global overfishing. It threatens marine ecosystems, puts food security and regional stability at risk, and is linked to human rights violations and organised crime. It can harm stocks of endangered species and threaten biodiversity. IUU fishing threatens local economies in the countries where it occurs and contributes to food insecurity in places where fish is a crucial source of income and a food staple.

The financial value of IUU fishing to those engaged in such harmful activities has been estimated to be between \$24.5 billion and \$57.5 billion of seafood products a year, between 14% and 33% of the value of all seafood produced from sea harvesting.

IUU fishing has also been associated with tax evasion, drug trafficking, arms trafficking on the same vessels and money laundering.

Examination of illegal fishing in East Africa by the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre found that corrupt networks headed by political or senior public servant 'kingpins' facilitate illegal vessel registration, allocation of fishing licences, and access to ports and port services.

A recent investigation by a small team of journalists found cases of debt bondage, wage theft, excessive working hours, beatings of fishing crew, passport confiscation, and denial of access to medical care on Chinese fishing vessels. The crew on the fishing vessels were mostly Indonesian migrants. In some cases, the Indonesians on the vessels became malnourished without adequate food. People working on the boats who request to go home are often violently punished. They were held on the ships against their will and were refused permission to call their families. The crew had their pay docked if they took any sick leave.

People were tricked into working on the fishing boats by recruitment agencies that then kept the workers' passports. The recruits were promised lucrative contracts to make money for their families but instead were subjected to extortionate recruitment fees.

Chinese vessels have transmitted false locations and vessel identities to authorities to engage in illegal fishing, taking fins from protected shark species and using prohibited fishing techniques.

The journalists reported that at least 1,000 members of the persecuted Uyghur ethnic minority group had been sent to work in seafood processing plants in Shandong province since 2018. People who refuse the transfers to the seafood plants have been imprisoned.



The journalists were able to link the Chinese seafood processing plants involved in forced labour of Uyghurs with hundreds of restaurants and grocery stores in Europe and the US.

Combatting illegal fishing and forced labour on fishing boats

Australian seafood importers can detect signs of criminal behaviour and actual criminal activity in the seafood they purchase. A paper by Belhabib and Le Billon (2022) reported on global fisheries-related offences between 2000 and 2020. They examined 6,853 events reporting 7,962 offences across 18 fishing-related categories, including illegal fishing, human rights abuses and smuggling. A total of 2,034 known vessels and 4,019 unknown vessels were associated with the reported offences. At least 33% of all the recorded offences were associated with just 450 industrial vessels and 20 corporations originating from China, the EU and secrecy jurisdictions. The researchers stated that their study demonstrated the ability to identify offenders.

In addition, there is at least one database of vessels associated with IUU fishing, making due diligence by importers somewhat easier.

Thus, it is reasonable to introduce laws to trace the source of seafood and to require importers to take reasonable measures to ensure the product they sell has been legally sourced.

What you can do

Write polite and respectful letters to:

Senator The Hon. Murray Watt
Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister



Points to make in your letter:

- Express deep concern at the level of seafood that is likely to be entering Australia from Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) sources, damaging the sustainability of seafood stocks and cheating source countries of vital tax revenue.
- In addition, express concern about the incidence of forced labour on some fishing vessels.
- Welcome that the Australian Government plans to introduce measures to address IUU.
- Ask that the reforms include measures to try and prevent the importation of seafood produced through forced labour.
- As a first step, request that the Australian Government implement an electronic Catch Documentation Scheme that would require seafood exporters into Australia to document the source of the seafood and the businesses the seafood has passed through before getting to Australia.
- Ask that the Australian Government commit to establishing an *Illegal Seafood Prohibition Act* modelled on the *Illegal Logging Prohibition Act 2012*. The new law should require that importers of seafood are required to do reasonable checks to ensure the product they are importing is legally sourced and has not involved the use of forced labour in its production.