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Why Saying The U.S. Seafood Market Is "Low Risk" For Slavery Is Risky



Malsie Ganzler Contributor

Food & Drink

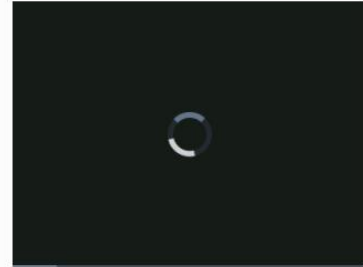
I cover food sustainability, especially as it relates to seafood.

TWEET THIS

Even in so-called "low-risk" countries, such as the U.S. and U.K., consumers are potentially eating lots of seafood that was caught, filleted, and packed by the hands of slaves.



Myanmar migrant workers preparing a fishing boat in the Thai coastal province of Samut Sakhon. A 'mafia' of recruitment agents is trapping Myanmar migrants to Thailand in debt bondage despite a 2017 law meant to fight exploitation in the kingdom's notoriously shadowy job market, activists and workers say. September 20, 2018 photo by Lillian Suwanrumpha/AFP/Getty Images GETTY



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I just came back from the [Choose Food Symposium](#), a conference about ethics and food put on by Johns Hopkins University, where the subject of modern-day slavery came up. During a presentation about labor in the food system, an audience member — aghast at the implication that even the U.S. supply chain includes forced labor — asked how to avoid buying products that were raised or harvested by slaves. She was clearly hoping there would be an easy answer.

I wish there was. But a recent report, "[Modern Slavery and the Race To Fish](#)," in the journal *Nature Communications* shows that, even for U.S. eaters, there isn't.

I oversee purchasing for a \$1.5 billion food service company, so I am particularly concerned about slavery and human trafficking in the food system. I have, at times, allowed myself to be (ever so slightly) comforted by the idea that U.S. fishing fleets are [considered low-risk for modern slavery](#). Yet, "low-risk" is not zero risk, as we found out when the Associated Press reported that [Hawaiian seafood was being caught by foreign crews who were](#)

confined on boats. Being a low-risk country is cold comfort when, according to NOAA Fisheries, the U.S. imports 80 percent of the seafood we consume. (Some of that seafood is actually caught in the U.S., shipped overseas for processing, and returned with confusing Country of Origin Labels, which I wrote about here.)

“Modern Slavery and the Race To Fish” illuminates the riskiness of clinging to a “low-risk” rating. According to the report, “After accounting for the mix of domestic and imported seafood in U.S. domestic supply, the potential slavery risk of seafood supply within the United States increases 8.5 times due to its dependence on imports.”

The report paints a complex picture of the links between modern-day slavery and fisheries’ performance at the international level, correlating the prevalence of modern-day slavery at the country level with levels of unreported catches and a lower economic value for catches. It found that fleets that rely heavily on government subsidies, fish outside exclusive economic zones (EECs) far from home ports, and fail to accurately report their catches have a tendency to fish beyond environmentally sustainable limits and have an increased risk of labor abuse. Factor in a lack of regulatory oversight and transshipment at sea (the practice of combining the catches of multiple vessels before landing ashore), and it’s possible to effectively “launder” an illegal catch by mixing it with legally caught seafood.

What does all this mean for conscientious eaters? Even in so-called “low-risk” countries, such as the U.S. and U.K., consumers are potentially eating lots of seafood that was caught, filleted, and packed by the hands of slaves. As the report states, “[P]roducts of fisheries from slavery-prone regions/countries may be consumed in developed countries in significant quantities, potentially making seafood consumers in developed countries unwitting participants in modern slavery.”

It’s another important wake-up call for businesses and consumers who care about this issue.

Link: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maisieganzler/2018/11/28/why-saying-the-u-s-seafood-market-is-low-risk-for-slavery-is-risky/#6fcea879441a>