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How Canadian consumers are eating seafood caught by modern-day slaves

By MELANIE GREEN StarMetro Vancouver
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VANCOUVER—There's a hidden cost to buying seafood in Canada, experts say: widespread labour abuses and modern slavery on the high seas.

And Canada is lagging behind other developed countries in suppressing the process, which occurs in several other industries such as textiles and timber, they argue.



Kyaw Naing, a slave fisherman from Myanmar, talks to a security guard through the bars of a cell at the compound of a fishing company in Benjina, Indonesia in 2014. He is among more than 2,000 slave fishermen who have been freed since March, when The Associated Press published stories about their plight. (DITA ALANGKARA / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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Meanwhile, these labour abuses function as undercover subsidies that allow distant-water fishing fleets to overfish, despite the fact that it should normally be unprofitable, according to research published Wednesday from the *Sea Around Us* initiative at the University of British Columbia and University of Western Australia.

“These companies can make a profit only if they get subsidies and if they don’t pay for their crews,” explained Daniel Pauly, principal investigator at *Sea Around Us*. “And the fish will end up in Canada.”

That’s because transshipment is a common practice, wherein multiple fishing vessels are combined at sea before landing at port to sell to wholesalers.

Seafood caught under conditions of modern slavery — defined as any exploitation that a person cannot avoid, refuse or leave because of threats, violence, abuse or deception — is “laundered” by mixing it with other fish before it enters the supply chain, Pauly said in a phone interview.

Then, the fish is exported internationally.

According to the [2018 Global Slavery Index](#), Canada ranked the sixth highest globally for annual imports of \$15 billion (U.S.) worth of goods at-risk of being produced through modern slavery. It found that 24.9 million people are working in conditions of modern slavery.

But abhorrent working conditions in the seafood sector is not new. A [2015 Associated Press](#) investigation found instances of workers on Indonesian islands being marooned and kept in cages while captains returned to port. The fish and seafood they caught was traced to supermarkets and supply chains around the world.

Researchers combined fisheries information from Sea Around Us with national-level data on modern slavery — and found countries whose fleets relied heavily on government subsidies, fish in the high seas, and fail to report their actual catch tend to fish beyond sustainable limits and are at high risk of labour abuses.

“Crews on vessels from China, Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea and Russia are particularly at high risk because of a lack of regulatory oversight in those countries combined with the complexities of jurisdiction at sea,” said David Ticker in a release, lead author from UWA.

But the incentive for slavery comes from maintaining fisheries at any cost, Pauly argued. Governments often subsidize the fisheries who are under pressure to turn a profit — and that’s where dropping labour costs comes in.

These “slave” fleets tend to stay at sea longer to fish more, while paying their crews little to nothing and forcing them to live and work in inhumane conditions, Pauly said. Still, the data did not account for slavery on fleets outside of the high seas.

He noted the numbers are likely higher.

Yet while companies turn a “huge profit,” residents in developing countries are placed under extreme duress to find ways to work and survive.

“This intense pressure on supply chains that causes slavery conditions, that definitely occurs in other sectors, are motivated by customers asking for cheaper prices,” he explained. “People have to ask themselves where does this cheap stuff come from?”

But unfortunately, Canadians are “used to” receiving very little information about the source of the products they are purchasing, said Julia Levin, seafood fraud campaigner with Oceana Canada, an independent charity.

And Canadians tend to trust the relevant government agencies and departments ensuring the safety of their food, she added. That's why it can be so shocking to learn about seafood fraud and its connection to illegal fishing as well as human rights abuses.

In the meantime, an increasing amount of seafood sold in Canada is shipped from overseas, Levin said. Estimates suggest up to 80 per cent is imported and this seafood follows a long, complex and "notoriously opaque" path from a fishing vessel to our plates.

But other jurisdictions have implemented laws around labour abuses, Levin said.

"U.S. trade law makes it illegal to import products made through forced labour and maintains a list of banned products. UK passed a Modern Slavery Act in 2015," she explained. "Unfortunately, Canada has few measures in place to prevent illegal products from entering supply chains."

Boat-to-border traceability — which the United States implemented in January of this year under the Seafood Import Monitoring Program — is necessary to ensure that all products entering Canada are legally caught, Levin said.

But the group is calling for full-chain traceability in order so that Canadians are not at risk of seafood fraud and can make responsible seafood choices. They're also asking that Canada requires catch documentation to identify the origin and legality of seafood for all domestic and imported fish — in line with existing European Union policy.

Levin noted that in December 2017 the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights conducted a study on these abuses, where Oceana Canada submitted recommendations. The result was the creation of an independent Canadian ombudsman but Levin said, to her understanding, the position was yet to be filled.

StarMetro reached out to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the Department of Oceans and Fisheries but they were not immediately available for comment.

In the wake of new findings, researchers called for a strengthening of national laws so that both the environmental and social elements of sustainability in seafood supply chains be audited in a transparent manner.

Pauly said Canada should participate in all international initiatives that are meant to suppress slavery.

"That is at least what one can expect," he said. "That means consumers must be watching their politicians, not so much their chefs."

The study was published in Nature Communications and was a collaborative effort with the Walk Free Foundation, architects of the Global Slavery Index.

Melanie Green is a Vancouver-based reporter covering food culture and policy. Follow her on Twitter: [@mdgmedia](https://twitter.com/mdgmedia)

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