

LATEST JOBS



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Cheap labor often comes at a high price, and we are all complicit. It is time to change the rules of the supply chain.

If you source from a country known for its human rights abuses, you better be sure your supplier is straight as a die.

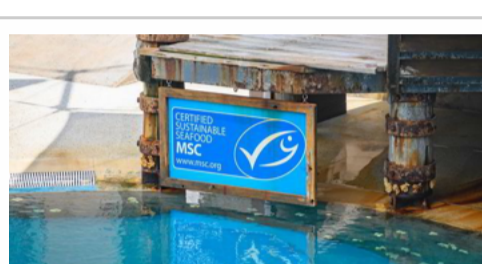
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By **Rachel Mutter** 

When *The New Yorker* story broke on forced labor allegedly being used in Chinese seafood factories, a familiar sinking feeling crept into my stomach.

It is the same feeling I have when I read most world news these days, but worse, it isn't accompanied by shock or surprise, just a general feeling of resignation.

Over the last few days myself and my colleagues have investigated the story ourselves, trying to get some kind of clarity on whether this is happening, on what scale, and -- *if it is* happening -- who might have known.



Confidentiality agreements shroud MSC certification process for China processors accused of using forced labor

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We have called the factories. We have called the buyers. We have called the certification standard setters and we've called the auditors.

Up and down the supply chain we are met with unanswered calls, a "not as far as we knew" or a genuine sense of shock.

All responses induce irritation. But *did* you know? Or if you didn't know, *why*? Ignorance, as they say, is no excuse.

Remedial action has been taken. Retailers have cut off suppliers, buyers have cut off factories, standard setting associations have questioned their auditors.



'Highly irresponsible': Chinese processing sector says Outlaw Ocean forced labor story is 'fabricated'

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It is a long-played-out performance in the seafood supply chain that we have seen time and time again, but appears to lead to little long-term change.

If this forced labor is happening in some Chinese seafood processing factories, for the workers supposedly torn from their families, made to work a job they don't want, far from home, what difference does it make? It's not like it won't happen again. Once the dust settles.

Sourcing from China? You should know about the Uyghurs

To give some context to the story, the Uyghur population, living in Xinjiang in the far west of the country, has long been a persecuted section of Chinese society, with human rights organizations and governments around the world condemning its treatment by the Chinese government and calling out serious human rights abuses.

There are about 12 million Uyghurs, mostly Muslim, living in Xinjiang. According to Human Rights Watch, there have been, and continue to be, many offences committed against them, including arbitrary arrests and detainments, destruction of their mosques and sacred sites, and the placement of the children of detained Uyghurs into state institutions such as orphanages and boarding schools.

It is a well known issue among Western governments. And it should be a well known issue for anyone sourcing from the country in which it is happening.

The checks are never foolproof

It is, of course, frustrating as a buyer. You think you have all the checks in place, but it turns out the checks are never foolproof.

Auditors are not actively looking to find a problem. They are looking to see their boxes are ticked and if they notice something untoward, they will flag it. But to dig beneath the surface, to assume guilt? That is not, I suspect, what they are about.



Several suppliers mentioned in Outlaw Ocean investigation have audited their supply chains and found no wrongdoing

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And, in their defense, in a situation of abuses of power and oppression, the crime is often as much hidden by the victim as it is the perpetrator for fear of punishment or retribution if they are to make themselves seen.

It took *The New Yorker* a substantial team of journalists, private investigators and inside sources to expose a possible issue, and even they have no absolute proof, just a suspicion people are working against their will.

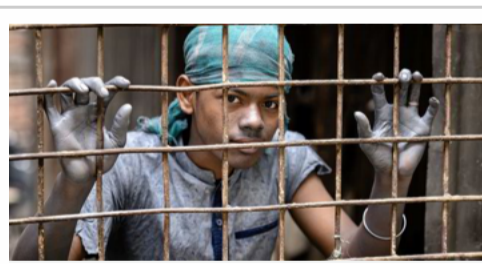
What to do?

I see you throw your hands in the air. "What are we to do?!"

I will tell you.

Unless you can hand on heart say you know without a shadow of a doubt that your supply chain is clean, then re-route it.

There are undoubtedly good suppliers in China, companies that act ethically and within international law, but there is pressure on them too to supply at your prices and to play within your tight purchasing budget.



These 4 strategies could help clean up the global seafood supply chain and rid it of human rights abuses

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If their government turns a blind eye to some cheap labor that breaks international human rights law, then maybe, despite your remonstrations, that is what the supply chain is unwittingly saying it is willing to accept.

Maybe it's time to change the rules of the game and admit that cheap labor often comes at a high price. We humans love a deal and seem to think we can find ways around paying for what we demand.

At the cost of the environment and society, we construct complex supply chains that re-route and muddy our sourcing

in order to get a good price. But people's labor *should* cost money. Protecting our environment *should* cost money.

We need to stop bemoaning the state of the world and stop turning a blind eye to what we ourselves encourage to happen.

We are all to blame for many human rights abuses. And as someone working in the seafood supply chain, you need to take responsibility for what happens on distant shores to enable your profits.

If you can't ensure this, then you need to change things. If aquaculture companies are farming salmon on land, then perhaps it is about time the more traditional supply chains were rethought too. Bring your processing inhouse, or live with the onus of being absolutely sure nothing or no one is hurt in the making of your product. (Copyright)

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