

COMMENTARY

Kerry Heffernan: Is the seafood you buy connected to worker abuses? Here's how to be a good consumer.

By Kerry Heffernan
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The Chang Tai 802, a Chinese-flagged ship, fishes for squid at night in 2021 off the coast of South America. Hazardous work conditions sometimes akin to slavery have been detected on nearly 500 industrial fishing vessels around the world, according to research by the Financial Transparency Coalition released on Nov. 15, 2023. (Isaac Haslam/Sea Shepherd)

Seafood is a distinct global commodity. It is the world's last major source of wild protein and one of the largest globally traded foods by value. Because much of it comes from international waters and has many links in its supply chain, and because most of it is caught or processed by China, it is also a uniquely difficult product to track.

A recent investigation by [The Outlaw Ocean Project](#), a journalism nonprofit based in Washington, and [published in The New Yorker](#) uncovered a pervasive problem of labor and environmental abuses in the global seafood supply chain. It also revealed the many ways in which the world's largest restaurants, grocery stores and even government suppliers are buying and serving seafood tainted by these practices.

As a chef, I feel a distinct responsibility to make ethical decisions about what we eat. I started working in restaurants at age 15. I attended the Culinary Institute of America, and after cooking for some years in France, I have spent most of my career in the New York area. I currently work as the chef at Grand Banks, a seasonal oyster bar and galley on the deck of a historic cod fishing schooner moored at Pier 25 in New York. In other words, I have a long and sentimental relationship with seafood.

Over the past three decades of working in restaurants, I've gotten to see the personal and political power that food has in people's lives, sustaining and bringing us together. A growing number of people in the restaurant business are working to channel that power in a positive direction, by finding ways to ensure that the food we serve does not include hidden costs. But globalization has stretched the distance between makers, movers and consumers, rendering it tougher for the average person to know the history behind what's on their plate.

Unfortunately, we now know that much of our seafood, at least what is coming from abroad and tied to China, is potentially connected to worrisome problems. The reporters who conducted the investigation boarded Chinese fishing ships on the high seas and in national waters all over the world — near the Galápagos Islands, near the sea border with North Korea and along the coast of West Africa — for the sake of inspecting working conditions. They uncovered myriad abuses, including forced labor, debt bondage, wage withholding, excessive working hours, physical abuse, passport confiscation, the denial of medical care and even deaths.

And the abuses don't end at sea. As part of this same investigation, reporters discovered something even bigger and darker in China's seafood processing plants. By using cellphone footage from workers inside the plants and mining company documents and trade data, the reporters found that much of the seafood being exported to the United States and Europe from Chinese plants is [processed by Uyghur and other Muslim minority workers](#) — a highly repressed population, from the region of Xinjiang, whom the Chinese government detains in "reeducation" camps and forces to work in factories throughout the country.

For years, I've been pushing for sustainability on all fronts, including sourcing local, seasonal and organic ingredients wherever possible. More recently, I'm pleased to say, the public has developed more of an interest in locally caught seafood. This matters because the longer the supply chain, which is to say the farther our seafood travels to get to us, the less we are able to see into it and the more opportunities for hidden costs, such as forced or child labor, or the climate impacts involved in shipping seafood halfway around the world for processing.

Chefs, restaurants, grocery stores and average consumers must insist whenever possible that the seafood they buy is locally caught and processed. Shortening the supply chain and buying local are not a cure-all. With seafood, however, it is one step toward lessening your risks as a chef or consumer of being tied to labor or environmental abuses.

For some types of seafood or certain buyers, local purchasing might not be an option. This is where pressure has to be applied by chefs, grocers and consumers on seafood companies to create better tools for ensuring that what they sell and serve is not coming from processing plants or fishing ships engaged in abusive practices. Yes, this may mean prices creep up. Isn't it worth it?

Sustainability and human rights advocates have recommended that companies exercise due diligence investigations of their supply chains all the way from bait to plate, including by directly engaging the workers who catch and process the fish. Whether such inspections can be done effectively in China is a tough question. Advocates have also called on grocers and restaurants to demand more information from plants about potential commingling of products from different vessels and to cross-check the names of their suppliers against governments' lists of bad actors.

But experts have also advised that there is only so much that consumers and industry can do. The U.S. government needs to take action by strengthening the seafood import monitoring program, increasing corporate reporting requirements and taking steps to enforce already-existing U.S. laws enabling customs officials to block imports from certain regions or industries. In response to the investigation, nonprofit legal groups and lawmakers have called for such an import ban to be applied on seafood from the two Chinese provinces where forced labor is commonly used in processing plants.

Time will tell if any of these tactics work. But in the meantime, the rest of us can keep trying to choose local and to ask tough questions before we buy seafood.

Kerry Heffernan is chef at [Grand Banks](#) in New York.

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