



LABOUR

HUMAN RIGHTS

CULTURE

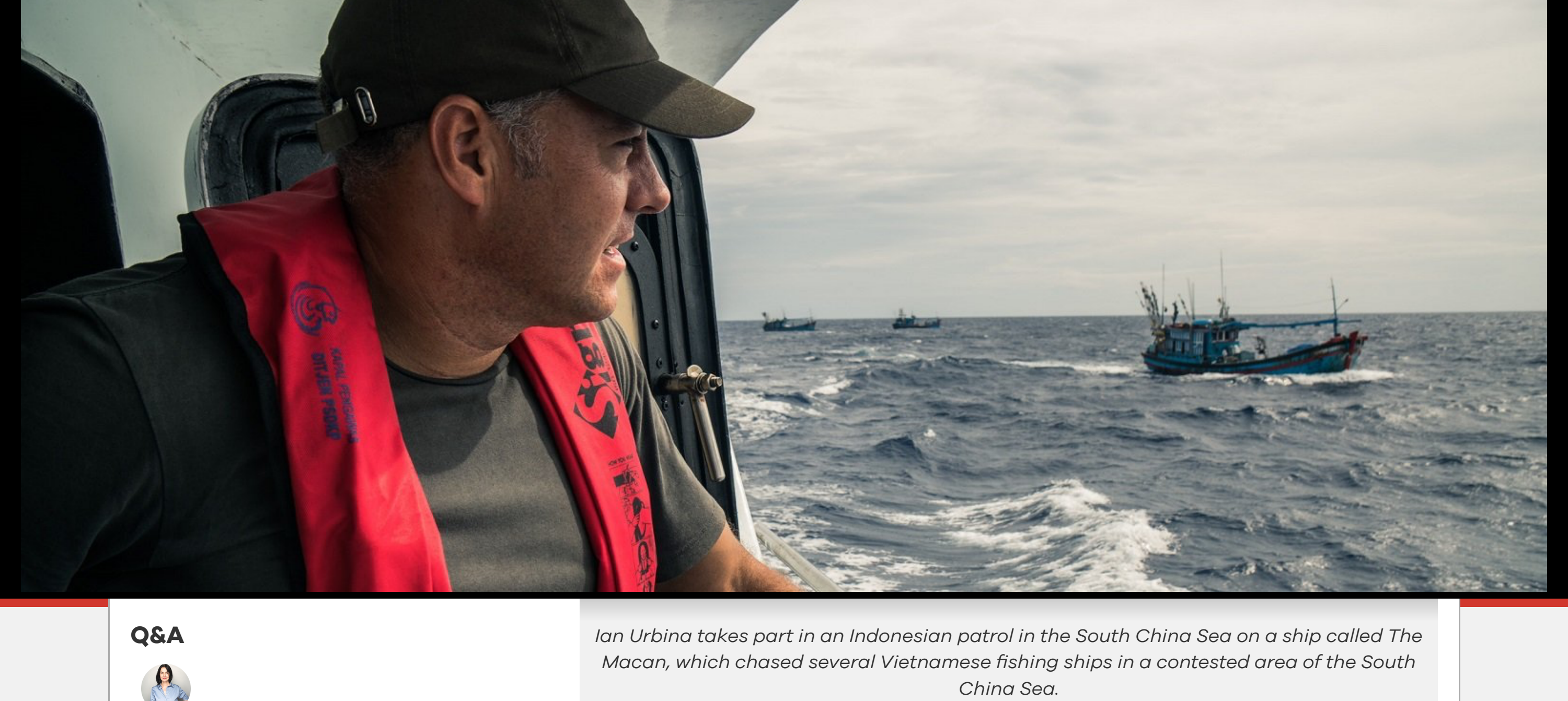
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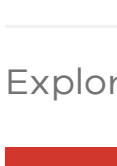
DEVELOPMENT



US investigative journalist, Ian Urbina: “The thing that has affected me the most is the extent of the violence in the fishing industry and its normalisation”



Q&A



By Brenda Chávez

11 June 2024

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Ian Urbina takes part in an Indonesian patrol in the South China Sea on a ship called The Macan, which chased several Vietnamese fishing ships in a contested area of the South China Sea.

(Fábio Nascimento/The Outlaw Ocean Project)

Ian Urbina spent 17 years working for the *New York Times*, where he won a Pulitzer Prize and a Polk Award. A decade ago, he began writing *The Outlaw Ocean*, a series of articles on human rights, labour and environmental abuses at sea. He left the newspaper to research for two years and publish *The Outlaw Ocean* (2019 [Knopf], 2020 [Vintage Publishing]), a book based on his previous essays. In 2019 Urbina received funding to found the non-profit investigative journalism organisation The Outlaw Ocean Project, which partners with media outlets from around the world to produce stories exposing the invisible crimes that go unpunished on the high seas: exploitation, modern slavery, child labour, death and violence in the fishing industry, as well as corruption, human trafficking and even clandestine abortions on international waters, an area that Urbina describes as a ‘frontier’.

Urbina has been nominated for an Emmy and several of his investigations have been adapted into films. In 2015 Leonardo DiCaprio, Netflix and Mishler Films bought the rights to make a film based on his book and articles. Urbina was invited to testify before a US congressional committee on slave labour in the supply chains of large global corporations and fast food chains, which could lead to changes in legislation.

Ten years after the adoption of the [Protocol \(29\) to the Forced Labour Convention](#) on 11 June 2024, and nearly two years after its entry into force, the stories published by Urbina and his team have highlighted the daunting nature of the task of eradicating forced or compulsory labour in all its forms, particularly in the fishing industry, and made it clear that no effort can be spared when it comes to exposing bad practices and implementing adopted legislation.

“You often wonder if you’re doing good, if your work is meaningful, if it matters to anyone or if it’s all just entertainment. Last year we saw the effect it had on American legislators, companies and consumers. I feel good, we seem to be having an impact,” says Urbina. He spoke with *Equal Times* via video-call from the small office where he works when he’s on the mainland, in the backyard of his home in Washington D.C.

In your experience, what are the main abuses in the fishing industry in terms of labour conditions and human rights?

The main categories would be violence, like beatings and killings, and criminal negligence (a slow-motion murder, like the disease beriberi, which is similar to scurvy, and which you can reverse in 24 hours by taking a pill and eating the right things). Beriberi kills a lot of ship workers because no one helps them. It’s like if your boss were to deprive you of water for two weeks, he would kill you. The third category is human trafficking for servitude. People are even kept in chains. There are many versions of captivity at work. What kind of world allows this to happen?

What has affected you the most from what you’ve observed in person?

The extent of violence and its normalisation in the fishing industry and on ships in distant waters. In some cases, this industry is 150 years behind others because they can get away with exploitation on the boats. There are debt bondages, murders, beatings, all with total impunity. The invisibility of a space that occupies two-thirds of the planet and has more than 50 million people working in it, with so little governmental and journalistic attention, is surprising. It’s a major anomaly, a blind spot. Living on land, it’s something that we don’t think about.

What are the worst global fishing fleets and industries that you’ve investigated?

We’ve completed a series on China, which is a fishing superpower. Its fleet is ten times larger than that of any other country. Its shore-based processing capacity means that it processes catches from other vessels [editor’s note: from companies in various countries looking to cut the costs of cleaning, cutting, etc. what they catch. The end product may stay in China, return to the country of the vessel that caught it, or go to a third country]. China does a lot of catching. It’s one of the most important players and the most difficult country to report on. Their boats operate according to their rules and nobody messes with them. They are very powerful and prone to illegal fishing and human rights abuses. There is also a high level of abuse on Taiwanese and South Korean vessels.

In your experience, how prevalent are exploitation – in all its forms, ranging all the way to modern slavery – and overfishing in what we consume in, for example, Europe and the United States?

No one has attempted to quantify it. Some researchers in the US suggest that one in five units may be affected in human rights terms, even if their product is legal. I would say it’s more if you count illegal fishing and seafood fraud. We’ve completed a major project on [Uighur slave labour](#) in Xinjiang [northwest China] and [North Korean slave labour](#), [which generates significant profits for both China and North Korea]. McDonald’s and Costco, among other companies, process in 15 to 20 plants [in China], the largest in the world. This affects large quantities of seafood.

What measures would help the fishing industry become more transparent?

On planes, trains and trucks, journalists and officials can ask people what cargo they are carrying, where they are going and who their workers are. [Planes, trains and trucks] don’t turn their signal off in the middle of their voyage and disappear, as happens in fishing and maritime shipping. This needs to change. We need to know where boats are, what they are doing, what their speed is and where they are headed. They should be prohibited from entering a port or unloading unless they show their whole journey so that governments and companies can monitor them. As citizens we can support organisations with ocean projects and talk about these issues. The more we do this, the more things will change. We can vote, we can ask where parties stand on these issues. And as consumers, we can inform ourselves about shorter local supply chains, with fewer possibilities to participate in all of this. This small effort to make informed choices raises the bar.

What led you to investigate the intersection of human rights, labour and environmental abuses?

When I started *The Outlaw Ocean*, one of my goals was to reimagine the ocean and get the public to think about it differently. Historically, journalism has approached it from an environmental, marine biodiversity perspective. I wanted to approach it from many angles, to not limit myself to one approach or interaction. We try to avoid that silo in our stories. We try to make sure there is a human, marine and climate element, while addressing all the other angles: food security, democracy, geopolitics. Staying at that intersection means that the stories we tell are better.

Most of your investigations are done on the high seas. How do you prepare for them and what challenges do you encounter?

One self-imposed rule is to do stories that we can report from sea. A lot of them are in dangerous conflict zones. I don’t do them if we can’t go there. It involves waiting to find out how to get there and what the logistics of the ships are. In places like Libya it can take up to a year to find people, to convince them, to get funding. Another difficult part is the destinations, like fishing grounds. It can take two weeks by boat to get to them. It’s boring, it’s frustrating, you don’t feel productive and the weather can be horrible. When you get there you work 20 hours a day, sleep at odd hours, get the material that you need and make sure that you keep it and organise it. I usually have one cameraperson with me because the boats only give us two spaces. It should probably be four people. We work hard and run around the whole time, all while trying to take care of our health so we don’t get sick. Every day, I spend an hour or two capturing what happened, in audio files or notes. If I have a satellite link, I send them to the team on the ground in case my phone goes down, there are problems, or our things are taken.

You were abducted in Libya while investigating migration issues. What security measures do you and your team take?

Places like Libya and Somalia are essentially war zones. It’s complicated to go there, with or without security. In Libya, the security you hire can protect you or put you at greater risk by drawing attention to you or what you’re investigating. It’s similar in Mexico, when we had problems it was because of the security, which betrayed us. They know where you are vulnerable. We have protocols, I carry a satellite link on my belt, which constantly sends my location. Every six hours we make phone contact to let people know that we’re safe and what we are doing. The biggest risk is deciding to go to conflict zones, then knowing if something is going wrong. In Libya, when 12 hooded militia members came for us, the first thing they asked me was where my tracking device was. They knew we were using it. The hotel rooms were under surveillance. In prison during the interrogation, they showed me pictures taken in my room. They came in when I was on the phone with my wife who heard how they captured and beat me. She activated the emergency plan by calling the US government. Otherwise I wouldn’t be alive. In places like that it’s often your ‘spidey sense’ that saves you. You can’t describe it but if you feel it. You don’t need to understand it, just act: get out of there, tone it down, whatever the case may be. It whispers to you while your ‘journalistic voice’ is yelling at you to hurry up, talk to this guy, or get to wherever it is to do a good interview, so it can be hard to evaluate.

You were a cultural anthropologist before you became a journalist. How does anthropology influence your journalism?

A principle of both journalism and anthropology is that wherever you go, you have to see the place, the people and the culture in a new way, like an alien. You have to reflect on the humour, the rules, the hierarchies, the language. That’s what makes good culture, good politics and good journalism. With my PhD I reached a marathon level of endurance. It helps me to develop research projects lasting months or years, to build them up and to have patience.

Do you eat fish? If so, do you think about the stories behind it?

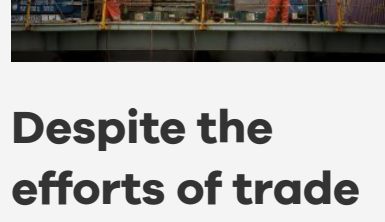
I get asked that a lot. I don’t usually answer, it’s not my role. I’ve been a vegetarian since university. I love seafood but, as citizens, minimising animal protein and not flying are big areas where we can reduce our impact. If I do eat seafood, it’s usually on a ship, with the sailors I’m covering. I try to be a good anthropologist, I eat their food, I try to understand their experience. I think about the story I’m working on, I think about whether the food will be cooked well enough, if I’ll get food poisoning and fall ill in the next few weeks, and I check to make sure.

This article has been translated from Spanish.

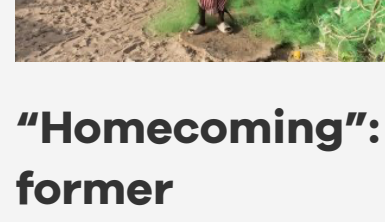
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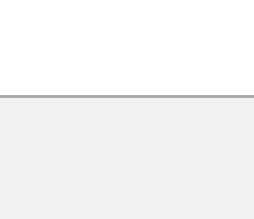
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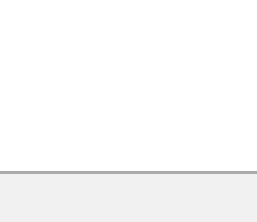
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