



## China's seafood supply chain has been broken for years. The industry has looked the other way.

After years of willful ignorance, the seafood supply chain has to face up to reality.

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The seafood industry -- up and down the supply chain -- is now at an unavoidable crossroads in its relationship with China.

There is plenty of blame, shame and embarrassment to go around from the latest investigation from reporter Ian Urbina and his Outlaw Ocean Project team.

It makes for heartbreaking reading and should prompt some real soul-searching across the industry.

It has been nearly six months since the first investigation broke, and while companies have said they are examining their supply chains, the latest story calls into question just how seriously the industry is taking the allegations.

Looking over the updated list of companies allegedly purchasing products from Chinese processors violating human rights, *it's hard to name a major seafood company not on the list*, and certainly not one that is processing whitefish.

China has for years and years reprocessed huge volumes of Western-bound seafood, but I'll bet most seafood industry executives would be hard-pressed to name a single Chinese company that provides this critical link in their products' journey.

Let that sink in. The seafood industry, which has invested billions of dollars and thousands of hours over the past two decades to improve transparency and traceability, has been willfully sending fish into a black box, provided that it comes out inexpensively processed on the other side, with the right certification stickers on the box (*take the quiz below, based on the allegations in the Outlaw Ocean Project investigation, to how many of these massive processors you can name*).

**1 / 3** Which of the following companies does or has supplied products to Ocean Beauty, Young's, Cite Marine and Auchan?

**2 / 3** Which of the following companies does or has supplied products to Chicken of the Sea, Espersen, Heiploeg, High Liner, Trident Seafoods and Mowi?

**3 / 3** Which of the following companies have supplied High Liner Foods, North Sea Holland, HEB and Albertson's?

The seafood importers and processors, given that their names are the ones linked with the factories, will be under the most scrutiny, and most pressure to act.

But consider all the years of failure along the supply chain for these violations to have occurred. Increasingly, auditors and certification groups are looking like rubber-stampers, or at least woefully unthorough.

Coming off worst is the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), the leading certification standard for sustainable fisheries. Its narrow definition of sustainability -- also an issue with its reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine -- is giving companies violating human rights an eco-halo: of the 33 processors examined in the Outlaw Ocean Project, 12 held MSC chain-of-custody certification.

By attempting to absolve itself of guilt in all the findings in the story, it ends up looking both callous and clueless.

And finally, we arrive at the retailers and foodservice buyers. Consumers trust that when they walk into a major retailer the products they buy are at the very least not made by forced labor. It's impossible for any buyer looking at competing bids to not imagine that the broad price differential is coming at a cost to someone, somewhere.

While it's tempting to lay some blame on consumers for not being willing to pay the "true" price of seafood, the argument doesn't hold water. It's up to the collective supply chain to offer reasons why the fish they are buying is worth it. First and foremost, that means convincing them that they can feel good about what they are eating.

Whether or not the industry can do that will depend on how swift the reactions are, and how convincingly they can say that they have solved the issue. And without all links in the supply chain taking part in the cleanup, it's difficult to see how that can happen.

It's more than likely that Urbina and the Outlaw Ocean Project has much more to uncover, and that means the industry does, too. ([Copyright](#))

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