

Canada lags behind on efforts to address human rights abuses in seafood supply chains

"Canada is falling behind in addressing labor abuse and sustainability in seafood supply chains"

By **PETER VANDERGEEST** - **CARLI MELO** - **MELISSA MARSCHKE**

PUBLISHED JANUARY 25, 2024 4:00PM (EST)



Crew members of purse seiner hauling in net while fishing for salmon (Getty Images/Thomas Barwick)

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#).

Seafood has become a source of concern for consumers who pay attention to the environmental and social impacts of what they buy. Climate change is [adversely affecting ocean ecosystems](#), and a series of [widely publicized scandals](#) have exposed [widespread illegal fishing](#) and awful working conditions in both fishing and seafood processing.

[Seafarers in fishing](#) often work 18 hours a day in [what is widely considered to be the world's most dangerous profession](#). Many are at sea for months or even years at a time, and most have [no access to Wi-Fi](#). [They are often excluded from labour laws](#) and [all are paid very low wages](#), despite producing food for high-income consumers.

Similarly, those working in seafood processing are also poorly paid, and [many are migrant workers](#) who lack basic labor rights.

In response to these concerns, governments in many seafood importing countries have taken action. The [European Union](#) and [Japanese government](#) have banned imports of seafood produced by illegal fishing, while the [United States' program to ban imports produced by forced labour](#) includes seafood.

The EU is also instituting a [corporate due diligence](#) approach that holds corporations accountable for human rights abuses and environmental impacts in their supply chains.

The Canadian government has yet to implement similar policies for seafood sold in Canada and is an outlier in its failure to hold buyers and retailers accountable for labor abuse in seafood supply chains. In the meantime, many Canadian seafood buyers and retailers have turned to private schemes that certify for sustainability, and less commonly for worker rights.

[Loblaws](#), for example, is prioritizing wild-caught seafood that is sourced from fisheries that are certified by the [Marine Stewardship Council \(MSC\)](#), as well as organic standards or fisheries making progress toward these or other private standards.

The MSC is the world's premier sustainability certification for fishing, [praised by ocean conservation groups](#). What Canadian seafood consumers do not know is that evidence is mounting that even gold standard certifications like MSC fail to address terrible working conditions in seafood supply chains.

Seafood supply chains

To start, we need to recognize seafood supply chain complexity. The freezer sections in Canadian supermarkets are full of frozen seafood labeled "product of China," while in the canned seafood section, most tuna is labeled as a "product of Thailand."

In reality, most of this seafood is caught by fisheries around the world and shipped to China, Thailand or other seafood processing hubs, where it is transformed into seafood products and exported — mostly to higher income countries.

China is the world's [largest seafood processing hub](#), importing, transforming and exporting [pollack, cod, shrimp, salmon, herring](#) and other species, as well as processing raw material caught by Chinese fishing vessels.

[Investigative journalism](#) by the non-profit [Outlaw Ocean Project](#) has revealed the use of [forced Uyghur labour in many of China's seafood processing facilities](#), as well as human rights violations and illegal fishing in [China's global squid fishery](#).

Many of the seafarers who work in this fishery are from Indonesia and the Philippines. They are paid a few hundred dollars a month to work under conditions that would be considered unacceptable on land.

Outlaw Ocean investigators found that many Chinese seafood factories had been audited for labor standards, and that importers were relying on these audits to assure consumers that the seafood was ethical.

But these audits — including the independent audits [required by MSC for its sustainability certified seafood](#) — failed to detect the use of forced labor found by the Outlaw Ocean Project.

The Outlaw Ocean's [Bait-to-Plate tracing tool](#) has identified many [Canadian seafood importers](#) and supermarkets that source from processing plants accused by the Outlaw Ocean of using forced labor.

Poor working conditions worldwide

These findings are not unique to China. Our [Work at Sea](#) project has found that unacceptable working conditions are ubiquitous in transnational seafood supply chains. This includes Thailand's tuna canning industry, which is the world's [largest](#).

Thailand's seafood processing industry relies on [over 160,000 migrant workers](#) from Myanmar and Cambodia. Workers are not guaranteed a minimum number of working days per month, meaning they are more likely to work excessive overtime hours and/or fall into debt.

This situation is made worse by [inadequate labor inspections](#) and [audits, ineffective grievance mechanisms](#) and the lack of unions. It is [illegal in Thailand](#) for migrant workers to participate in organizing unions, although they can be members of unions.

The raw materials for Thailand's canned tuna industry are imported as frozen whole fish from fisheries across the Pacific and Indian Ocean. The vessels are owned and operated from Taiwan and other East Asian countries, and are mostly crewed by workers from the Philippines and Indonesia.

These seafarers have told our research team that work on Taiwanese vessels is preferable to Chinese vessels, partly because their pay, at a minimum of US\$550 per month minus agency fees, is better.

But [working conditions still fall short of standards](#) set out in private certification schemes, government fishing regulations or the [Work in Fishing Convention](#), which is meant to ensure fishers have decent working conditions. The reality of this transnational supply chain is not visible on canned tuna labels.

Canada is lagging behind

Canada is falling behind in addressing labor abuse and sustainability in seafood supply chains. Although the [Forced Labour and Supply Chain Reporting Law](#) came into effect in January 2024, this law has been [criticized for serving as a mere checkbox exercise](#) for companies and lacking effectiveness in [curbing forced labor in Canadian supply chains](#).

To address these shortcomings, Canada needs human rights and environmental [due diligence legislation](#) — policy that mandates Canadian companies to substantially address human rights abuses and environmental harm in their supply chains.

It is also critical that Canada go beyond private audits and government inspections to work with international institutions to help create a robust system that monitors and enforces standards for work in global fishing, one that meaningfully involves workers.

Canada has not even ratified the International Labour Organization's [Work in Fishing Convention](#) — that would be a good start. For inspection and monitoring, the [ITF inspectorate](#), working in some 140 ports around the world to monitor working conditions in the shipping sector, is a potential model.

By taking these steps, Canada can play a pivotal role in fostering ethical and sustainable practices in its seafood supply chains, ensuring the well-being of workers and the environment.

[Peter Vandergeest](#), Professor of Geography, [York University, Canada](#); [Carli Melo](#), PhD Candidate in Geography, [York University, Canada](#), and [Melissa Marschke](#), Professor of School of International Development and Global Studies, [L'Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa](#)

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

By **PETER VANDERGEEST**

MORE FROM PETER VANDERGEEST

By **CARLI MELO**

MORE FROM CARLI MELO

By **MELISSA MARSCHKE**

MORE FROM MELISSA MARSCHKE