

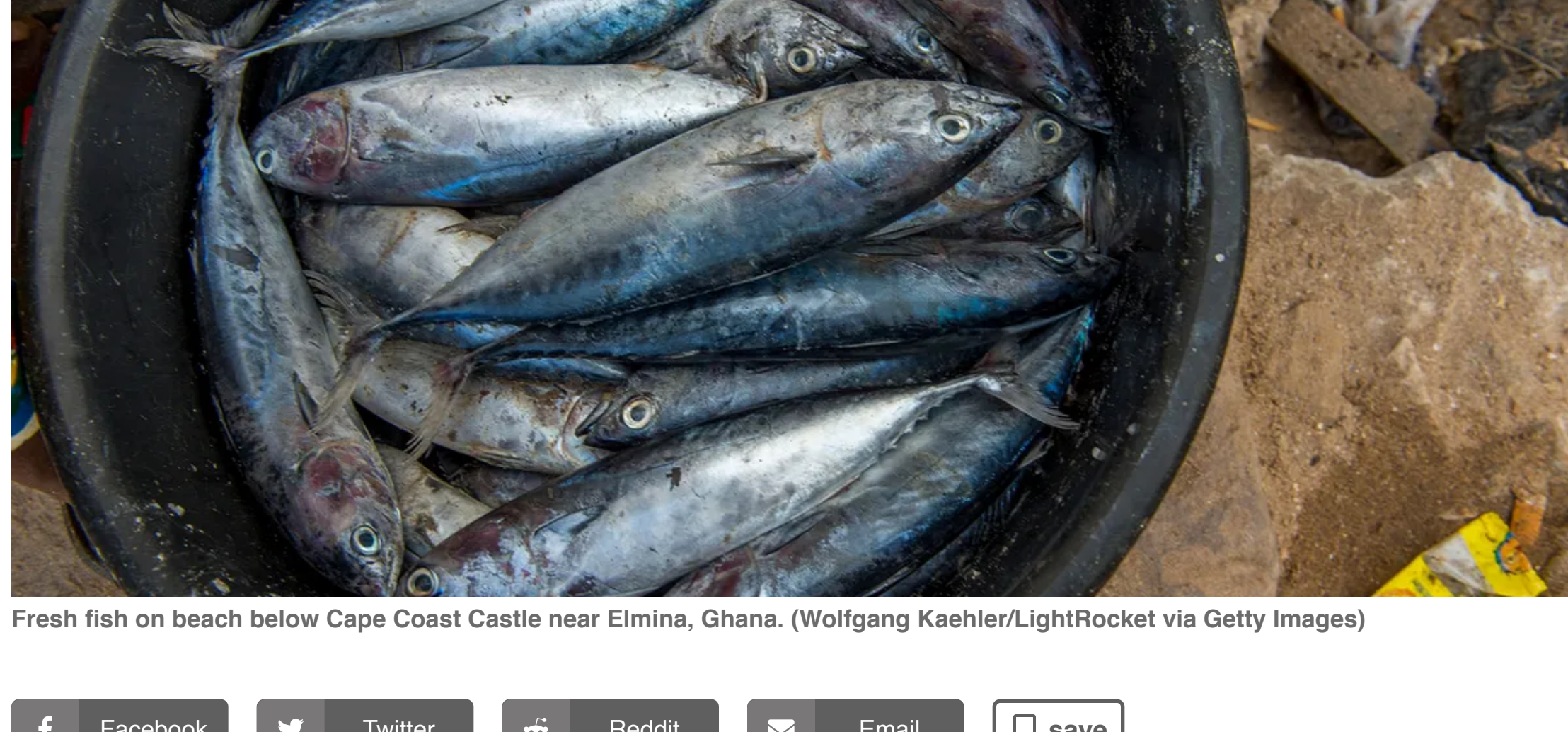


Why suspicious deaths and violence plague the seafood industry and what we can do about it

The fishing industry is notoriously unregulated and corrupt, and whistleblowers face grave risks, including death

By **MATTHEW ROZSA**
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Fresh fish on beach below Cape Coast Castle near Elmina, Ghana. (Wolfgang Kaehler/LightRocket via Getty Images)

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There is a certain romanticism about fishing, an ancient practice that brings to mind the Biblical Saint Peter, famously a fisherman, or perhaps the titular protagonist of Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea." Behind every fish, crustacean and other form of seafood we eat is a story, or how that food landed on our plates.

"Violence in the fishing industry and fish fraud are two ends of the spectrum."

In an ideal world, the process would be simple and direct. A lone fisher or group of happy fishers would go to the ocean, a river or lake, then haul in endless bounties of aquatic creatures. The workers would be treated with respect, the environment would be respected and the seafood would be carefully handled.

But in reality, there are multiple steps between when seafood is caught and sold, during which workers can be exploited, pollution can be dumped in the environment and fish depleted, mislabeled or otherwise mishandled.

Perhaps most strangely of all, the people who speak out against these things often wind up mysteriously dead.

There was **Emmanuel Essien**, a 28-year-old fisheries observer who mysteriously disappeared in July 2019 while aboard the Chinese-owned vessel **Meng Xin 15**. Although the police said there were no signs of violence or any other crime, Essien's family insists his disappearance was linked to his reports of illegal fishing on a trawler, including environmentally unsustainable practices.

That wasn't all; the Environmental Justice Foundation, which investigated Essien's apparent death, **reported** at the time that roughly 90% of Ghana's industrial trawlers are owned by Chinese companies that regularly abuse their workers by beating them, forcing them to work in unsafe conditions and paying substandard wages.

Next **Eritara Aati Kaierua**, a fisheries observer in Kiribati, died under mysterious circumstances in March 2020 on a Taiwanese vessel in the Pacific Ocean, with Human Rights at Sea International investigating the matter and finding the state's official story to be highly flawed. Then in October 2023 another Ghanaian fisheries observer went missing, this time 38-year-old named **Samuel Abayateye**. He had been assigned to a South Korean vessel; his decapitated body washed ashore the coast of Ghana six weeks later.

Instead of being limited to Ghana, the problem of fisheries observers facing physical danger is **global in nature**. While outright murder is relatively rare, violence is pervasive. A survey of fisheries observers in the United States found that roughly half had been harassed on the job, and the Association of Professional Observations (APO) routinely logs stories of people being threatened at knifepoint, locked in their rooms, raped, starved, forced to accept bribes or otherwise physically harmed while performing their professional duties.

But these people being threatened are simply trying to ensure that seafood is safer for everyone. The fisheries observers exist to make sure companies do not worsen the dire problem of plastic pollution, which could overwhelm and **eradicate much of ocean life by 2050**. Plastic pollution is linked to **various forms of cancer**, as well as **infertility**, and studies show **our seafood is full of plastic products**.

Fisheries observers also prevent catches from being mislabeled, a common practice known as **fish fraud**. In 2016 the non-profit group Oceana released a **report** which revealed that one out of five of the more than 25,000 samples of seafood that they tested from 55 countries were mislabeled. Worldwide Asian catfish, hake and escolar were the fish most likely victims. Nearly 60 percent of the time, the replacement fish were from species that could get certain consumers sick.

In other words, the problems of the abused fishers and fishery observers very quickly become the problems of seafood consumers.

"Violence in the fishing industry and fish fraud are two ends of the spectrum," Elizabeth Mitchell-Rachin from the APO Board of Directors said to Salon.

"There is the catching of the fish. Then there is the consumer's convenience of grabbing a can of 17g of protein off the shelf after a workout. Everything in between is an opaque mess." Even though consumers will think they are making responsible purchases if they see stickers saying a product is "bait to plate," "eco-friendly," "dolphin-free" or "wild-caught," those claims are frequently false.

"It will always be a mess unless consumers start demanding transparency of the fisheries and accountability of managers who control the fishing," Mitchell-Rachin said.

Ian Urbina, a journalist who authored The New York Times bestseller "The Outlaw Ocean" and founded the journalism nonprofit **The Outlaw Ocean Project**, said that consumers will need to insist on companies faithfully tracking the conditions on their fishing ships and in their processing plants. The Outlaw Ocean Project **recommends solutions** from enforcing existing laws to engaging in social auditing of fishing companies. If there is one edge that reformers have over industry abusers, it is that the public is generally unaware of how China — which The Outlaw Ocean Project describes as "the superpower of seafood" — and other countries behave unethically at sea. The full extent of the problem is simply not widely known.

"Various types of crimes go hand in hand at sea," Urbina said, including "fish laundering, invading other nations' waters, using debt-bonded and trafficked workers, violence on crew, wage theft, criminal neglect (such as deckhands dying of diseases like **beriberi**)" and general abuse of workers.

"All stem typically from captains and companies above them looking to cut corners for cost saving reasons," Urbina explained. "All also happens because downstream buyers have accepted not knowing their true supply chains."

Mitchell-Rachin says that fishery resources need to start being publicly owned, with governments possessing broader authorities to regulate them.

"The key is transparency," Mitchell-Rachin said. "Start with making all fisheries monitoring data publicly accessible as well as accountability of fisheries management practices. The devil is in the details."

If the general public understood to ask about observer bycatch data, witnessed reports of violations, learning whether specific monitoring protocols are followed and other key pieces of information, ordinary citizens could play an active role in holding fishing companies accountable. For that to work, however, companies must be required to tell the truth.

"You can say that you have an observer program, but without accountability and transparency at all levels, programs are vulnerable to corruption and obfuscation," Mitchell-Rachin said. "It seems instead that the laws are protecting the privacy of illegal fishers more than the rights of the fishery workers, including observers. We need more transparency, not less."

David Hammond, a non-practicing barrister and executive director of Human Rights at Sea International, also told Salon that transparency is critical, albeit from a someone different vantage point. Hammond says that seafood consumers need to comprehend a "fundamental" fact about the people who put their favorite foods on their plates. The simple fact that they work at sea means that their basic human rights cannot be guaranteed as easily as if they worked on land.

"We need more transparency, not less."

"The issue is one of transparency and accountability, and the context of what happens out at sea is not the same as what would happen on land, quite simply because of the environment," Hammond said. "On land if there's an issue you can invariably walk away."

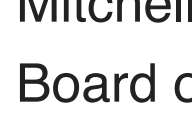
That option obviously doesn't exist in the middle of the ocean — or, for that matter, even in countries like Indonesia, where indentured servitude still exists. Compounding the difficulty caused by the environment, there is a "lack of enforceability and oversight by constabulary forces, such as coast guards," Hammond explained, "who invariably operate within coastal jurisdiction or the 200 multiple-mile limit, which is the common exclusive economic zone around the world," which limits their effectiveness.

"Most people simply do not understand the complexity of ocean governments," Hammond said. "They do not understand the fundamental principle that rights at sea often do not exist as they do on land. It is just not part of the common language."

Until that principle is more widely understood, Mitchell-Rachin says, people like the families of the deceased fisheries observers will never feel as if they have received justice.

"In the absence of transparency around these deaths and how they were investigated, they all become suspicious," Mitchell-Rachin said. "We're in contact with the families who have a right to know every aspect of, not only how their loved ones passed, but also about the job and what the government is or isn't doing to protect others. Most have come to us saying they just want to prevent another family from experiencing the same trauma."

By **MATTHEW ROZSA**



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