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Canada's seafood industry is failing to address forced labour atrocities

Consumers seeking human rights assurance and wishing to make responsible choices have been left in the dark, often unable to make fully informed decisions about the seafood they purchase.

Updated May 26, 2024 at 5:02 a.m. | May 26, 2024 | 2 min read



"Consumers seeking assurance and wishing to make responsible choices have been left in the dark, often unable to make fully informed decisions about the seafood they purchase," writes Christina Callegari.

Wilfredo Lee AP

By Christina Callegari Contributor

Clear evidence of horrifying human rights abuses in the global seafood industry has recently surfaced, yet Canada's seafood supply chains persist in operating with opacity, lacking proper traceability and transparency. The time for complacency is over.

The Outlaw Ocean Project, an investigative news organization dedicated to exposing the hidden harms of the global seafood trade and the Corporate Accountability Lab have exposed a slew of human rights and environmental violations in global seafood supply chains.

These have included [forced labour and worker rights violations](#) in China's fisheries and processing plants and [illegal antibiotic use and human rights violations](#) in shrimp production in India. Outlaw Ocean also revealed that some of these seafood products have found their way to the [shelves of major grocers in Canada](#), including Costco, Loblaw, Sobeys, Metro and Walmart.

This news has shocked many and for good reason. While many grocers have social responsibility policies in place, their reliance on standard audits and certifications is [proving to be insufficient](#) to detect human rights abuses.

Audits and certifications can fail in detecting abuses when self-assessments are permitted, making it easy for facilities to withhold or tamper with information, auditors provide advance notice for inspections providing time for abuses to be hidden, or when employees being interviewed by auditors are afraid to speak honestly.

Consumers seeking assurance and wishing to make responsible choices have been left in the dark, often unable to make fully informed decisions about the seafood they purchase. In Canada, consumers are not provided adequate transparency from major grocers and seafood companies, and government [regulations are not robust enough](#) to keep products associated with these abuses out of the country.

While seafood supply chains worldwide are notoriously complex to track, Canada is especially lagging behind in bringing its traceability standards to the 21st century. Despite promises to implement a "boat-to-plate" traceability program in 2019, there has been little action by the government to implement stronger regulations.

However, the current [review of the Safe Food for Canadians Act](#) and its regulations provides an opportune moment for the Canadian government to develop stronger traceability and enforcement in collaboration with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada Border Services Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada.

Traceability is a critical tool needed as a first step in determining if a seafood product is ethically sourced, sustainable, and free from exploitation. Companies must be aware of the product's source and have an in-depth understanding of how the suppliers and their employees are operating. Companies must adopt a due diligence approach in their supply chains and regulations should be improved to support better traceability and enforcement.

Canada cannot continue to keep its door open to illegal practices, forced labour and human rights abuses. It's time for grocers to leverage their position in the seafood supply chain to model transparency, influence their suppliers and improve legislation.

By advocating for more robust regulations and holding corporations accountable for their supply chains, we can create a future where exploitation and abuse have no place in the seafood industry — or the seafood aisle of your grocery store.

Christina Callegari is a senior coordinator at the Ecology Action Centre and a team member of the partnership SeaChoice.

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