



A Human Rights Wake-Up Call for the Seafood Industry

By Ryan Bigelow



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(Image courtesy of the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions)

More than 34,000 people gathered in Barcelona last week for a [massive trade show](#) focused on seafood, the world's most widely traded commodity, valued at over \$236 billion. Yet behind Seafood Expo Global's bustling exhibition halls, dealmaking and receptions, the industry faces a sobering reckoning.

In the past few weeks, an [Associated Press investigation](#) revealed evidence of forced labor, child labor and environmental degradation throughout India's shrimp supply chain, including its farms, peeling sheds and processing plants. [Another report](#) found that North Korean workers are being forcibly sent to Chinese factories where they endure beatings and sexual abuse and have their wages taken by the state. Last week the European Union also [approved a ban on products](#) made from forced labor, a step partly driven by [evidence](#) that Chinese seafood products involve the exploitation of the country's Uyghur Muslim minority.

The intersection of environmental and social responsibility in seafood

This steady rise in reported human rights and labor abuses serves as a wake-up call to companies of all sizes. After decades of hard work to become environmentally responsible companies, some may be tempted to hit the snooze button when it comes to the "human factor." But the hard truth is that supermarkets, restaurants and other seafood businesses can no longer afford to take their time on this issue. Rather, in the face of this sea change, businesses must accelerate efforts to eradicate human and labor rights abuses from their supply chains or risk a tidal wave of consumer backlash, reputational damage, legal consequences, and loss of market access.

After all, it's become increasingly clear that environmental and social responsibility are two sides of the same coin. If a company is treating people poorly, it most likely doesn't care about the environment — and the reverse is also true. Look no further than the Indian shrimp industry investigation, where low pay and inhumane working conditions have gone hand in hand with environmental contamination from shrimp farm runoff. This interconnectedness underscores the importance of companies embracing a holistic approach to sustainability, addressing both the well-being of workers and the health of the planet.

The good news is that doing the right thing is also good for the long-term viability of businesses. Viral documentaries like "[Seaspiracy](#)," podcasts like "[The Outlaw Ocean](#)," exposés by media outlets, and apps like Seafood Watch are raising awareness and changing consumer behavior.

In fact, a [2023 NielsenIQ study](#) found that products touting environmental and social claims are growing faster than those without. The data also shows that certain demographic groups, such as higher-income households and urban residents, are more inclined to purchase products with these claims. [An earlier survey](#) found that two-thirds of consumers would stop buying a product if they learned its manufacture involved exploiting workers.

Navigating seafood's complex supply chains

Seafood involves complex supply chains, often passing through multiple intermediaries and countries before reaching the consumer. The humans involved in seafood supply chains are especially vulnerable to exploitation since the majority of operations take place in remote high-seas areas, far removed from regulatory oversight, or in countries like India and China where auditing firms have limited ability to effectively monitor supply chains. The process can seem daunting, and it's neither cheap nor easy, but the benefits of action far outweigh the risks of complacency.

Companies can start by recognizing that the mantra "you can't fix what you don't know" is pivotal. The very act of due diligence to examine supply chains can reap multiple rewards. Through thorough analysis and a commitment to transparency, companies uncover areas of concern, put pressure on outdated systems and forge new pathways for improvement. Whether by engaging with suppliers to enforce good labor practices, investing in sustainable sourcing or seeking ethical alternatives, they can future-proof their business while driving reforms that resonate throughout global supply chains.

It's also important for the seafood industry to embrace social responsibility not only on a global scale, but also closer to home. Rather than merely reacting to headline-grabbing problems overseas, companies must seize this moment to address internal systemic challenges and implement policies for equity, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, people of color, migrants and Indigenous communities.

Most importantly, businesses don't need to navigate the journey toward sustainable seafood practices alone. Organizations like the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions are providing [guidance](#) and [resources](#) to help companies identify and mitigate risks. Businesses can also draw inspiration from industry leaders like [Aldi](#) and [Albertsons](#) that have made sustainable seafood commitments. And real-world examples abound, with smaller companies like the members of [Sea Pact](#) implementing measures to protect the ocean and communities. By leveraging these resources and learning from others, businesses can strengthen their sustainability efforts and contribute to a more responsible seafood industry.

While the challenges within the seafood industry may seem insurmountable, the potential for progress and transformation is undeniable. As industry leaders return to work following the Seafood Global Expo, it's imperative to prioritize social responsibility. By taking decisive action, companies can drive positive change, foster inclusivity, and create a future where workers and the environment are safeguarded within sustainable and ethical supply chains. This pivotal moment calls for collective commitment to ensure a seafood industry that not only thrives, but also serves as a beacon of responsibility for generations to come.



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