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GUEST ESSAY

# A Brief History of a Problematic Appetizer

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**By Ian Urbina**

Mr. Urbina is the director of the Outlaw Ocean Project.

Americans didn't always have an appetite for squid.

As recently as 1970, U.S. fishermen caught squid mostly by mistake, and when they did, they either tossed it back or used it as bait. By 1990, however, the invertebrate — now masquerading as calamari — had become a restaurant staple, appearing in the appetizer lane of menus across America alongside Buffalo wings and loaded potato skins.

This sea change in the appetizer universe can be traced back to a few key catalysts: the magic of marketing, the unintended consequences of a federal conservation campaign and the rise of China as the world's unrivaled seafood superpower.

In the early 1970s, American stocks of traditionally targeted fish like cod and menhaden were plummeting. Alarmed by the looming crisis, politicians, universities and conservationists decided that one way to address the problem would be to encourage Americans to eat more squid, of which there was plenty. Collectively, they began a rebranding campaign designed to persuade Americans to eat more of the ubiquitous, eight-armed mollusk — no small task, given that most people considered the creature to be slimy and generally off-putting.

That all changed in 1974, when a business school student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology named Paul Kalikstein came up with an idea. American consumers would probably get over squid's texture if, as with onion rings, chefs breaded and fried it. Other experts also argued that restaurateurs should start referring to squid as calamari, from words for the animal in several Romance languages, which sounded more exotic. Restaurants tried it, and it worked: Americans started to order calamari.

Around 1980, the dish had become so popular that a restaurant in Santa Cruz, Calif., started the annual International Calamari Festival, drawing some 600 attendees. The festival grew more extravagant in the years that followed, with attendance ballooning to thousands of people. A 30-foot model squid was constructed for the event. Children dressed up in tentacles. Thespians staged a squid-themed play about morality.

The appetizer's meteoric rise in popularity eventually led The New York Times to create the Fried Calamari Index in 2014, a tool for tracking the historical emergence of trendy foods. Americans imported or caught at least 85,000 metric tons of squid in 2022.

It makes sense for humans to eat squid. Environmentally minded chefs like it because it is one of the lowest carbon-emitting sources of animal protein on the planet. Squid are also surprisingly equipped to handle climate change: Ocean acidification doesn't seem to bother the animal, and rising ocean temperatures can cause it to reproduce more quickly. "Squid is truly the food of the future," says Paul Greenberg, the best-selling author of "Four Fish" and "American Catch."

But squid is time-consuming to prepare, particularly on a large scale. That initially made many restaurants reluctant to embrace it as an offering. Then China stepped in, providing cheap labor as a solution to the problem. By the late 1990s, more and more of the world's squid was being processed in China, which was also catching more and more of the creature.

That shift not only cemented calamari as a mainstay on America's restaurant tables; it helped establish China's pre-eminence over seafood. Much of the squid that ends up on American plates today is caught in the high seas off South America by industrial Chinese fleets. With as many as 6,500 ships, the Chinese distant-water fishing fleet is more than double the size of its biggest competitors', which include South Korea's and Taiwan's. Cuttlefish and squid account for roughly 70 percent of the landings from China's distant-water fleet.

China's domination in seafood has raised deep concerns among American fishermen, policymakers and human rights activists. They warn that China is expanding its maritime reach in ways that are putting domestic fishermen around the world at a competitive disadvantage, eroding international law governing sea borders and undermining food security, especially in poorer countries that rely heavily on fish for protein. In some parts of the world, frequent illegal incursions by Chinese ships into other nations' waters are heightening military tensions. American lawmakers are concerned because the United States, locked in a trade war with China, is the world's largest importer of seafood.

A recent investigation that my team and I conducted revealed a worrying range of human rights and environmental crimes tied to Chinese ships and processing plants. China's distant-water fishing fleet has been tied to myriad crimes, including cases of raiding Argentine waters and, in violation of Chinese law, turning off transponders, which are designed to transmit their locations publicly. Chinese ships have also fished in North Korean waters, breaking U.N. sanctions, and engaged in violence, wage theft, forced labor, severe neglect of deckhands and human trafficking. Because most of the world's fishing takes place far out at sea, out of sight, the abuses are hard to stop — which means, despite what seafood companies might claim, most buyers have no way of knowing whether their dinner was a product of this system.

Like the boats that supply them, Chinese processing plants rely on forced labor, from North Korea and from Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in China. Despite strict U.S. laws forbidding the import of goods produced with North Korean or Uyghur labor, we found that Chinese companies using these workers exported at least 47,000 tons of seafood since 2018 — including more than 17 percent of squid imported in the U.S. — to dozens of American importers, some of which supply U.S. military bases and public-school cafeterias.

Companies importing seafood linked to Uyghur labor also have supply relationships with major food service, wholesale and retail brands, including Sysco, Walmart and Ruggiero Seafood, one of the country's largest squid distributors. I reached out to these companies and asked them about various concerns tied to forced labor on fishing vessels or in processing plants connected to their seafood. Some companies, such as Walmart, said in response to questions that they condemn human rights abuses and expect their partners to comply with corporate standards. A few others, like Sysco, said they would look into our findings. Many, like Ruggiero Seafood, did not respond to questions.

Most economists agree that globalization has made modern commerce more efficient and products cheaper. But it has also stretched the distance between producers, movers and consumers, making it harder to know whether what you're consuming is tainted by forced labor or environmental crimes. With ships so far from shore, constantly in transit, crossing countless national jurisdictions, seafood supply chains are especially tough to track because they consist of so many links — fishing boats, refrigeration vessels, cold-storage warehouses, processing plants, packagers, exporters, importers, wholesalers, grocery chains, restaurants and, finally, customers.

Supply-chain laws intended to prevent the U.S. import of products tainted by illegal labor practices, such as sweatshop garments and conflict diamonds, are less effective in regulating seafood. Many countries, including China, simply refuse to comply and provide details about their ships and processing plants. Lawmakers and federal agencies in the United States lack the political will to apply existing antislavery and product-tracking laws that could help. When it comes to seafood violations, investigations are slow, and they complicate international trade deals.

Ocean researchers warn that the popularity and unregulated harvesting of squid are now driving its demise. A study published this year in *Science Advances* found that squid stocks are fast declining. Researchers also say that the collapse of squid stocks could have repercussions for the ocean's broader biodiversity because the creature holds an important position in the marine food pyramid.

That's everyone's problem. In all likelihood, if you buy squid at a supermarket or what's advertised as locally caught calamari in a restaurant, that food is part of this complicated story. It is worth thinking hard about how those rings were caught and at what cost.

*This article was produced in collaboration with the Outlaw Ocean Project, a nonprofit journalism organization in Washington, D.C. Austin Brush, Joe Galvin, Daniel Murphy, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan and Dan Rosenzweig-Ziff contributed reporting.*

Ian Urbina is the director of the Outlaw Ocean Project.

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**A correction was made on Oct. 23, 2023:** *An earlier version of this article misstated the titles of books by Paul Greenberg. He is the author of "Four Fish" and "American Catch," not "Four Fish and American Catch."*

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