

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION: The Outlaw Ocean Project

Extent of illegal practices by Chinese high-seas fishing fleet uncovered

Ian Urbina, director of The Outlaw Ocean Project, a non-profit journalism organisation, wrote this story as part of a four-year investigation he conducted with an international team of reporters at sea and on land, which revealed a broad pattern of severe human rights abuses tied to the global seafood industry. The reporting focused on China because it has by far the largest high-seas fishing fleet and processes much of the world's catch. The team of reporters included **Joe Galvin, Sue Ryan, Maya Martin, Jake Conley, Daniel Murphy, and Austin Brush**.

On the high seas north of the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic an 11-year-old Chinese squid boat was nearly 200 miles from shore, its crew members were busy with their work. They were eating their lunch. Instead of speaking more to the fisherman, he turned to the camera. "I can't take us to the camera in Argentina."

John Urbina, a reporter based in the United States, had been in the boat for several weeks. He had been told by the captain that he was to be interviewed. He had been told that he was to be interviewed. He had been told that he was to be interviewed. He had been told that he was to be interviewed.

The investigation documented cases of debt bondage, where fishermen are forced to work long hours, beatings of deckhands, passport confiscation, the denial of timely access to medical care, and the denial of timely access to medical care. The investigation documented cases of debt bondage, where fishermen are forced to work long hours, beatings of deckhands, passport confiscation, the denial of timely access to medical care, and the denial of timely access to medical care.

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labour practices in the seafood sector. The US government reports much of its seafood from China. Half of the fish stocks served in US public schools, for example, have been processed in China, according to a study by the Congressional Budget Office.

The investigation explained that state and large-scale fisheries have increasingly used various grants to buy seafood directly from commercial vessels, many of which come from China. The Chinese fleet is the largest in the world.

But reporting revealed Chinese vessels illegally entering the waters of other countries, including the United States, to violate anti-fishing laws. The investigation revealed Chinese vessels illegally entering the waters of other countries, including the United States, to violate anti-fishing laws.

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Unpleasant quarters - Ian Urbina, of the Outlaw Ocean Project, stands aboard the dangerous and dirty area where African deckhands sleep aboard a Chinese fishing vessel off the coast of West Africa.

Musical messaging - Reporters in the high seas near the Falkland Islands prepared plastic bottles engraved with their names, and that contained a pen, cigarettes, hand sanitizer and interview questions written in English, Chinese and Indonesian, to toss on to their at-risk decks. Many vessels responded, offering sailors the bottles in return.



Back to back - Ian Urbina, of the Outlaw Ocean Project, sleeps on board a South Korean squid vessel while on the sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea, near the North Korean sea border.

Working of workers is greatly from poorer inland regions of the country. Labour contracts provided by former deckhands from fishing ships and online advertisements posted by recruiters showed how the one-time and desperate are often targeted in schemes that amount to labour trafficking. The investigation also sought to identify labour concerns within China's borders, where large amounts of the world's seafood fish processed, including catch coming from European and US ships and waters. Over the past decade, China has increased its catchment on US waters.



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The many handoffs of catch between fishing boats, carrier ships, processing plants and exporters, there are gaps in traceability. We relied heavily on two satellite tools to track ships and to identify illegal or suspicious behaviour, including when ships turned off their transponders for longer than seven days, a practice prohibited by Chinese law. These included the ship's a fisheries monitoring tool built by the Allen Institute for AI and Global Fishing Watch. In some cases, we featured investigators in China to secretly follow tracks carrying seafood from their port to factories. Trade data then allowed us to track exports from processing plants to stores and restaurants abroad.



A closer look - The Outlaw Ocean Project team inspects a Chinese fishing vessel off the coast of West Africa.

using the search term "North Korean boat" we found several videos on YouTube of what appears to be female seafood plant workers, most posted by male employees. One Chinese commenter said the women "have a strong sense of nationalism and identity and are self-disciplined". Another pointed out the workers have no choice but to obey orders, as their family members will suffer.

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Allowed aboard - On the high seas near the Falkland Islands, Ian Urbina stands a ladder to board a Chinese squid ship to interview crew.

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