

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, Jack Conley, Daniel Murphy, and Austin Brush.**

On the high seas roughly 8,000 miles south of the Falkland Islands, an 800-strong crew of Chinese sailors who had been working on Chinese squid ships exclusively ditched into a dark hallway in whispers for help. “Our passports were taken,” they said in unison. “They won’t let them back in.” They were afraid their bosses, the Chinese company that had brought them to the Southern Ocean, would force them to continue working, but that of being overfished.

“Can you take us to the embassy in Argentina?” they asked.

For nearly two minutes bounded in the cramped metal corridor, the crew and the deckhands abruptly walked away. Minutes later, I was ushered off the ship.

After I returned to shore, I contacted my family.

“My heart aches in my chest,” his older daughter said. “I can’t imagine the horrors in other countries.”

Deckhands spend more than 20 hours a day without touching land or communicating with their families, and they work long shifts that often last more than 12 hours.

Some contract deckhands

spend 12 hours on deck without sleep, causing fatigue without a break, enduring prolonged

heat, and enduring constant noise. The crew and their families have no access to basic necessities like food, water, and medical care.

The reporting revealed Chinese crews did not receive the wages or other benefits they deserved.

“It’s heartbreaking to see what’s happening to these men,” says the executive director of the International Labour Rights Forum, a US-based advocacy group that has been fighting for workers’ rights for 15 years.

“We’re seeing a new level of exploitation,” says the executive director of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a US-based environmental group that has been fighting for marine life for 30 years.

This was one of many stark summaries during a four-year investigation conducted with an international team of reporters at sea and on land that revealed a broad pattern of severe human rights abuses tied to the global seafood industry. We focused on China because it has by far the largest high-seas fishing fleet and processes much of the world's catch.

Our reporting estimates it has 37,000 distant-water fishing ships. Though this figure does not include vessels in contested western Pacific waters and satellite imaging showed the fleet may be closer to 100,000, the United States and the European Union, in contrast, have fewer than 80,000 distant-water fishing vessels each.

The investigation documented cases of debt bondage, wage withholding, excessive working hours, beatings of deckhands, passport confiscation, the denial of timely access to medical care, and deaths from injuries on hundreds of high-seas fishing ships.

From just one port — Montevideo in Uruguay — showed that for much of the past decade, our deckhands had been disembarked there roughly every month and a half, mostly from Chinese fishing ships. The US State Department and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration both named China among countries most likely to engage in illegal,



Unusual messaging... Reporters in the high seas near the Falkland Islands prepared plastic bottles wrapped down with rice, and that contained a pen, cigarettes, hand soaps and interview questions written in English, Chinese and Indonesian, to toss on deck to fish off docks. PHOTO: JAMES GIBBY FOR THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

distressed water fish, cargo surface is covered in trash, and so right the deckhands had to find a tight rope to bring the boat-sized hull that are used to allow a vessel to get to the surface of the water.

Deckhands spend more than 20 hours a day without touching land or communicating with their families, and they work long shifts that often last more than 12 hours.

Some contract deckhands are exposed to shark species in remote areas of the ocean without a licence, causing fatigue without a break, and enduring constant noise. The crew and their families have no access to basic necessities like food, water, and medical care.

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Over the past decade, China has increased a crackdown on Uighur



Unpleasant quarters... Ian Urbina, of The Outlaw Ocean Project, climbs aboard the dangerous and dirty area where African deckhands sleep aboard a Chinese fishing vessel off the coast of West Africa. PHOTO: JAMES GIBBY FOR THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT



A classic look... The Outlaw Ocean Project team inspects a Chinese fishing vessel off the coast of West Africa. PHOTO: JAMES GIBBY FOR THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

goods connected to Xinjiang, including cotton, silk, and pharmaceuticals, has forced local governments to impose strict restrictions on the production of cotton and polyethylene terephthalate (PET) fabrics.

Local governments are generally forbidden from reporting in Xinjiang and sensors installed in Xinjiang interpret all critical and sensitive content as “sensitive”.

Reporting around these coastlines, our team reviewed hundreds of pages of internal company newsletters, local news reports, a database of Uighur testimonies, travel documents, and legal documents from the government.

We watched thousands of videos uploaded to the internet mostly to Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, which showed Uighur labourers, men and women, working in Chinese factories to the global brands, buyers and sellers of this seafood. This video is distinctly difficult with seafood because in

using the search term “North Korean fisheries”, we found several videos on Douyin of what experts say to be female migrant plant workers, mostly posted by male employees.

One Chinese commentator said the women “have a strong sense of nationalism and identity and are self-sacrificing”. Another pointed out that workers have no choice but to obey orders, or their family members will be forced labour to commence when

they stop.

This type of investigation journalism tends to have more difficulty because it can damage the business interests and commercial value of the companies. As a result, we tried to connect the supply chain from the plants of sea or in the Chinese factories to the global buyers, buyers and sellers of this seafood. This video is distinctly difficult with seafood because in

published on Douyin. This footage, however, features frozen squid heads showing useful details like vessel names or brand labels, providing the reporters another way to connect and track to illegal migrant labour to commence using forced labour to commence when

they stop.

We investigated the locations

where these videos were taken by using Google Earth Pro satellite imagery. Google Earth was searched for “North Korean fisheries” and “Chinese processing plants” returning images of packaging with those codes. The reporting team used these codes along with information from Chinese and American trade databases to track the full supply chain.

Our trips at sea to visit the Chinese fishing boats were arranged by fishing rights with writing partners. In some cases, national fisheries enforcement authorities or private fishing boat captains agreed to let us to target the various fishing grounds around the world. In other countries, marine conservation groups, including Greenpeace, Earthrise, and Friends of the Earth transported the team to high-seas locations of interest.

Our exchanges with companies and other stakeholders, in which they defended themselves or answered our questions, so that advocates, journalists and policymakers could see the full version of these discussions, and potentially follow up in the future.

As we reported, we were faced with many reminders that the problems we were identifying were likely pervasive in the industry.

In June 2013, a woman named Silvana Morales was walking along a beach near Maldonado, Uruguay, picking up trash, when she found a small plastic bottle containing a napkin with black writing on it. Inside, we published a database we built of more than 700 squid fishing boats with their names and where they were based, and a photo of the message to her brother, Luis, who spoke Spanish and sent back a translation. Hello Luis, I am a crew member of the ship La Yuan Yuan, and I was locked up by the company. When you see this paper, please help me call the police! SOS, SOS.

Six months before the message in a bottle washed up on Uruguayan shores, my team and I were in the North Atlantic chasing down ships from the La Yuan Yuan. La Yuan Yuan, one of them was the ship named in the message.



Deck hand... Ian Urbina, of The Outlaw Ocean Project, sleeps on board a South Korean squid vessel while on the sea of Japan, after sea border. PHOTO: JAMES GIBBY FOR THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

language, and often induced by debts involving mounds of food such as white rice or instant noodles, which are low in this vitamin. The disease, fatal if left untreated, has historically plagued northern populations, but it has largely been controlled in the US through vaccination.

Labour contracts provided by former deckhands from fishing ships and online advertisements posted by recruiters showed how manyowitz and desperate are often forced to sign leases that amount to labor trafficking.

The investigation also found that Chinese labour concerns within China's factories, where large amounts of the world's seafood gets processed, including catch coming from European and US ports. The Chinese Coast Guard and Border Protection has confiscated more than \$1.8 billion (NZ\$2.7 billion) of illegal fishing activity in Chinese waters.

On squid ships, which make up a large portion of the Chinese

the many hundreds of catch between fishing boats, carrier ships, processing plants and exporters, there are gaping holes in transparency.

We relied heavily on two methods 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 include SkyLight Fisheries monitoring tool built in the Allen Institute for AI and Global FishNet.

With Netafim, we hired investigators to film to covertly follow trucks carrying sea turtle meat from Shandong port to factories. Trade data then allowed us to track exports from processing plants to stores and restaurants around the world.

In order to get a view inside the processing facilities, we used eavesdropping software to record workers from the internet, but by

the fictional narrative of the film is an amalgamation drawn from interviews with dozens of deckhands who provides a glimpse into a sense of national pride, adventure and duty that many individuals choose to take on.

The film makes the point that the US must stand up to the West and be up to judge the brutality of the fleet. American divers are among the primary consumers of seafood produced on these ships.

To ensure the reporting could carry global impact, we partnered with two dozen newspapers and magazines in 100 countries to publicise the findings while also reaching out to government officials with country-specific memos to contact for their distinct audiences so these journalists could carry the investigation forward in a way that spoke to their audiences.

Other elements of this journalism project also make a difference.

To offer a more intimate and humanizing perspective on why consumers, whether Chinese or foreign, might choose to take a dangerous, often exploitative job on these ships, we produced a documentary film that follows a fictional character, a young man from China who is deciding whether to follow in his father's footsteps and work on a Chinese

fishery. The film also includes a website that showed all of our interactions with the more than 300 companies, government agencies and non-governmental organizations associated with the problematic behaviours we uncovered. This page included



Allowed aboard... Ian Urbina climbs a ladder to board a Chinese squid ship to interview crew. PHOTO: JAMES GIBBY FOR THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

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