



A new report sheds light on the problems behind our imported shrimp

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Published: 3/27/24, Last updated: 3/28/24

Thailand has long been the face of the [shrimp](#) industry's troubled track record. A series of investigations between 2014 and 2015, including bombshell reporting from [The Guardian](#) and [The Associated Press](#), revealed that [slavery and other labor abuses](#) were widespread in processing facilities and fishing operations that provided feed to shrimp farms, leading governments to issue warnings and many companies to end relationships with Thai suppliers. As the Thai industry's reputation was ravaged by these allegations, and poor overall aquaculture practices put its shrimp stocks under constant threat of disease, the country made a pledge to clean up its human rights performance — and its shrimp farms.

Shrimp is by far the most popular seafood in the U.S., and the U.S. is the largest shrimp importer in the world; more than 90 percent of the shrimp we eat is [farmed](#) overseas. So when costs of Thai farmed seafood inevitably went up, the U.S. began looking elsewhere to satisfy its demand for cheap product. As Nathan Rickard, a lawyer for the Southern Shrimp Alliance, explained on a [2022 episode of "What You're Eating."](#) the longstanding "Thai dominance" had in fact already been supplanted by imports from a somewhat unlikely country: India, previously a rather minor player. Its market share was only continuing to grow. "What's our guarantee that the same thing that we were concerned about in Thailand isn't happening with India?" he wondered.

Now, a new report may bring some answers. And as the authors contend, "India's sudden competitiveness with countries known to use forced labor should have sounded alarm bells."

Building a booming shrimp industry

This month, the Corporate Accountability Lab (CAL) released one of the first published investigations into the on-the-ground reality of the Indian shrimp industry. Between 2021 and 2024, Indian journalists and advocates conducted field visits in the east coast state of Andhra Pradesh, the center of the country's shrimp production, to produce ["Hidden Harvest"](#) — interviewing more than 150 workers and people in nearby communities, as well as shrimp company executives and management, Indian government officials, local labor leaders and medical professionals familiar with the human toll of the industry. What they concluded: Shrimp farming in India has many of the same problems it does in Thailand, sometimes even involving the same companies. And the supply chains of some of the largest U.S. grocers and restaurant chains are implicated.

India's huge shrimp industry, heavily dependent on the U.S. market, is a fairly recent development: Per the report, more than half of the peeled shrimp we'll see today in the freezer aisle or on the appetizer menu was farmed in India, but fifteen years ago, that figure was less than 4 percent, a tenth of what was imported from Thailand at the time. Things began to change when, in 2009, a new non-native species (*Litopenaeus vannamei*, the popular "whiteleg" shrimp) was introduced to India and quickly adopted for aquaculture. Now the world's largest shrimp exporter, India in many ways mirrors its former competitor — its industry falling into similar patterns, CAL argues, in the effort to keep prices artificially low.

As Rickard explained on FoodPrint's podcast, "the way that the Thai industry kept down its labor costs is they started to contract out work to places called 'peeling sheds.'" Producing the pristine, hand-peeled shrimp preferred by U.S. customers at a low price point was impossible without outsourcing to informal processing operations, often staffed by undocumented migrant workers from other countries in Southeast Asia. "That's where a lot of the issues with forced and child labor came up with in that supply chain," Rickard told us.

CAL reports that a similar system has emerged in India, with much of the deheading, deveining and peeling contracted out to small, often-unregistered facilities — where workers are provided little heat protection and safety gear and often work without official employment terms. But even at company processing plants, the work is dangerous. And peeling is not the only link in the supply chain that merits concern: "Hidden Harvest" looks at various segments of India's shrimp industry, a source of income for more than 1.2 million households, including the hatcheries that supply "seed" (juvenile shrimp), the majority-smallholder farms where the shrimp is raised and the facilities where it is prepared and packed for export.

Workers share their stories

In CAL visits to various facilities, sources said they worked long hours, sometimes more than 12 per day, and were often paid insufficiently or infrequently, also reporting instances of sexual harassment and verbal and physical abuse. Injuries, including frostbite from handling frozen shrimp and skin and respiratory irritation from exposure to chemicals or contaminated water, were common. So was discrimination on the basis of caste, class and gender: Workers in the sector often come from already-vulnerable populations, including Dalits, Adivasis (India's tribal peoples) and those from poor agricultural and fishing communities, many of them internal migrants with few job prospects in their home states. Children and young teenagers, mostly girls, were known to work in processing and packing instead of attending school. "I don't know how much my pay is," one girl, who had traveled from West Bengal looking for employment, told CAL. "The owner will not pay me directly but remit it to my parents."

India has expansive laws against forced labor, but with little record-keeping and government oversight, it likely persists in the shrimp industry: Workers whose housing was tied to their employment reported living in overcrowded, under-maintained, heavily surveilled company housing with little freedom of movement. Many spoke anonymously due to fear of threats, intimidation or other forms of retaliation. CAL also found evidence of debt bondage, a form of forced labor that involves "recruitment fees," often paid with a loan, with workers essentially indentured until their debts are settled. Some of these claims are corroborated by a formal whistleblower complaint from an employee of Indian shrimp company Choice Canning, who before resigning helped facilitate an [undercover video investigation for the Outlaw Ocean Project](#).

The CAL connects some of these labor abuses to a predatory "agent" model wherein farmers, many caught in India's growing agricultural debt crisis, transition into shrimp aquaculture and buy seed and supplies on credit with little guarantee that they will be able to compensate workers — or even have any revenue to speak of — after paying it off. "Until farmers consistently and reliably earn enough to pay their workers," the report reads, "this industry will remain unsustainable and have a high risk of labor and environmental abuses."

[Modern aquaculture](#) can bring with it serious environmental impacts, even when it is regulated more strictly. In India, construction of the ubiquitous coastal shrimp ponds has destroyed mangroves, crucial for biodiversity, carbon sequestration and storm protection, at a massive scale. In Andhra Pradesh, CAL researchers were informed that runoff from shrimp farms, containing salt, chemicals and toxic waste, was contaminating drinking water, impacting agriculture and contributing to algal blooms and declining fish populations along the coast, indirectly hurting local fishermen. Antibiotics, used extensively to prevent the diseases that arise easily on shrimp farms, were a particular concern, contaminating ecosystems and drinking water and contributing to increased antibiotic resistance. Though the FDA bans shrimp produced with antibiotics, the agency's poor testing record has allowed much of it to enter the U.S. undetected: Antibiotics are regularly found in shrimp imports, but the proportion of products tested is around 0.1 percent. The European Union, by contrast, tests half.

Failing stopgaps and future solutions

The story here is not uncommon in our current global food system: A cheap product available in large volumes usually comes at a hidden cost, and when a company or country does face real consequences for its harmful practices, there tend to be others ready to "race to the bottom" and fill the void with little scrutiny. But "Hidden Harvest" also calls one proposed means of scrutiny — third-party certifications, which attempt to provide oversight where governments do not — into question.

Much of the Indian shrimp exported to the U.S. has been certified by major aquaculture monitoring agencies and bears one of two [common labels](#) for farmed seafood: [Best Aquaculture Practices Certified](#), an initiative of the Global Seafood Alliance, or [Farmed Responsibly ASC Certified](#) from the Aquaculture Stewardship Council. Producers and facilities pay to be certified through private auditors, which monitor compliance with the certifying body's worker welfare and environmental standards. But the prevalence of these labels on Indian shrimp, CAL suggests, indicates that current monitoring practices are ineffective and violations underreported. The report quotes an auditor who recounted what he'd learned in more than a decade in the role: "Nobody is working for the sake of betterment of workers ... Everybody is here to make money."

CAL contends that third-party labels, and the "social audits" that inform them, are no guarantee of ethical or sustainable production, and in fact can [actively obscure problems](#) that require attention. The report proposes that instead of relying on these certification schemes, [major buyers of Indian shrimp](#) — a list that includes Whole Foods, Costco, Walmart and Target, plus restaurant chains like Cheesecake Factory, Olive Garden and Red Lobster — should overhaul their procurement practices, ensure producers are hiring workers directly as employees and providing basic documentation like contracts and pay stubs and be willing to take on the associated costs. The most effective way to achieve this, the authors say, is to engage with worker-led organizations, taking on binding agreements that guarantee a living wage and creating real systems for addressing grievances.

Of course, governments also have a role to play. Some next steps proposed in the report are basic: India's government should enforce existing labor laws, for example, and strengthen others, improving the ways it regulates and monitors this problematic sector. But CAL makes extensive recommendations for the U.S. government as well. In addition to eliminating its [own purchases](#) of shrimp produced with forced labor, the government should initiate trade investigations into the industry in India and fill loopholes in enforceability mechanisms like the Seafood Import Monitoring Program. The report also demands the Department of Labor add Indian shrimp to its [list of goods produced by child and forced labor](#), which currently identifies Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar and, even today, Thailand as countries of concern.

This call for DOL action has been echoed by U.S. shrimpers and trade groups, including the Southern Shrimp Alliance. As Rickard told us back in 2022, "There are sources of supply that you can go to that don't present these risks. And that's, I think, what the focus now is from the industry, is making sure that people understand that these are not the only options — that it's not something where we're just racing to the bottom."

Top photo by Carlos/Adobe Stock.

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