

STUDY FINDS 40% OF SEAFOOD COMES FROM FLEETS WITH HIGH RISK OF MODERN SLAVERY

7 November 2018 -- Nearly 40 percent of the global industrial seafood catch comes from fleets at a high risk of exploiting workers through modern slavery practices, according to new research published today as part of an international collaboration between Minderoo Foundation, the University of Western Australia and the University of British Columbia.

Wide-scale depletion of fish populations and the substantial increase in efforts required by industrial fleets to maintain existing catch volumes has put pressure on fishing operators in many countries to cut costs in the face of declining profitability. At the worst extremes, this pressure leads companies to reduce operating costs by fishing illegally and reducing expenditure on crew pay, safety and living conditions.

The research paper “Modern slavery and the race to fish”, published in Nature Communications today, combines data on national prevalence of slavery from Minderoo Foundation’s Global Slavery Index with national data on fisheries from the Sea Around Us initiative on a global scale.

The research found that the national prevalence of modern slavery, an indicator for slavery in national fisheries, is associated with countries that have been assessed by the Sea Around Us to under-report their fisheries catch, a strong indicator of poor fisheries governance. These fisheries also typically target lower value catches, a practice that can place pressure on operators to reduce costs through labour abuses.

“We have long known that both modern slavery and overfishing are practices that thrive where regulation and the rule of law is lax,” said co-author and Minderoo Foundation chairman Andrew Forrest. “It’s sad but unsurprising that these two injustices have now been found to be working hand in hand.”

The research found countries with identified slavery issues in their fishing industry provide fishing subsidies, operate distant water fishing fleets and have high levels of undocumented fishing. These practices allow industrial fishing industries that would otherwise be economically and ecologically unsustainable to remain lucrative.

This environment provides unscrupulous fishing operators the opportunity with impunity to force people to work excessively long hours, with little to no pay, often under appalling conditions.

The global fishing industry relies heavily on migrant workers from developing countries. The industry preys on such workers due, in part, to the overfishing of coastal fish populations that has driven subsistence fishers – those who fish to supply food for their families and communities – to seek other work. These workers often lack formal status in the jurisdictions where they find work, rendering them invisible to labour inspectors.

Lack of regulatory oversight also facilitates trans-shipment at sea, a practice where the catch or crew are transferred between fishing vessels before returning to port, potentially keeping crew at sea for months or years at a time and enabling the concealment of illegal fishing and modern slavery. This allows seafood caught illegally and/or under conditions of modern slavery to enter supply chains alongside legally caught fish.



The fishing industries identified as at high risk of labour abuses generate almost 40 percent of global catch, much of which is then exported and retailed in developed markets, such as the US, the EU and Australia.

Co-author Professor Dirk Zeller, Director of Sea Around Us at UWA said imported seafood was usually combined in local markets with domestic fleet-caught fish. “Thus, the seafood available to domestic consumers in Australia, the EU and the US becomes at least eight times more likely to have been produced or processed with modern slavery.”

Fiona David, co-author and Research Chair of Minderoo Foundation said: “National legislators need to implement and strengthen laws and oversight to ensure both the environmental and the social elements of sustainability in seafood supply chains are addressed in ways that are fair, legal and transparent. This means minimum labour standards and also supply chain transparency requirements for businesses.”

The research was an international, collaborative effort between the Sea Around Us initiative and the Fisheries Economics Research Unit at the University of British Columbia in Canada, Minderoo Foundation’s Walk Free Initiative in Australia, and the Marine Futures Laboratory and Sea Around Us – Indian Ocean initiative at the University of Western Australia.

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