



Barrels of fish sit on a dock after being unloaded from a boat in Songkhla, Thailand, in February 2016.
(photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty)

Was Your Seafood Caught With Slave Labor? New Database Helps Retailers Combat Abuse

By Clare Leschin-Hoar, NPR, 01 February 18

The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program, known best for its red, yellow and green sustainable seafood-rating scheme, is unveiling its first [Seafood Slavery Risk Tool](#) on Thursday. It's a database designed to help corporate seafood buyers assess the risk of forced labor, human trafficking and hazardous child labor in the seafood they purchase.

The tool's release comes on the heels of a new report that confirms forced labor and [human rights abuses remain embedded](#) in Thailand's fishing industry, years after global media outlets first documented the practice.

The [134-page report](#) by Human Rights Watch shows horrific conditions continue. That's despite promises from the Thai government to crack down on abuses suffered by mostly migrants from countries like Myanmar and Cambodia — and despite pressure from the U.S. and European countries that purchase much of Thailand's seafood exports. (Thailand is the fourth-largest seafood exporter in the world).

For U.S. retailers and seafood importers, ferreting slavery out of the supply chain has proved exceedingly difficult. Fishing occurs far from shore, often out of sight, while exploitation and abuse on vessels stem from very complex social and economic dynamics.

"Companies didn't know how to navigate solving the problem," says Sara McDonald, Seafood Watch project manager for the Slavery Risk Tool.

The new Seafood Watch database, which took two years to design, assigns slavery risk ratings to specific fisheries and was developed in collaboration with [Liberty Asia](#) and the [Sustainable Fisheries Partnership](#). Like Seafood Watch's color-coded ratings, the Seafood Slavery Risk Tool aims to keep it simple — a set criteria determines whether a fishery will earn a critical, high, moderate or low risk rating.

A "critical risk" rating, for example, means credible evidence of forced labor or child labor has been found within the fishery itself. Albacore, skipjack and yellowfin tuna caught by the Taiwanese fleet gets a critical risk rating. A "low risk" fishery, like Patagonian toothfish in Chile (also known as Chilean seabass), is one with good regulatory protections and enforcement, with no evidence of abuses in related industries.

Until recently, environmental concerns dominated most of the conversation around sustainable seafood. Issues like overfishing, mangrove destruction, pollution and illegal fishing determined whether a seafood item was deemed one to enjoy or avoid.

But when reports began to surface in [2014](#) and [2015](#) that seafood harvested or processed by forced labor was making it into the supply chains of major U.S. retailers like Walmart, Kroger, Safeway and restaurants like Red Lobster, corporations were quick to make [public commitments](#) and include stronger language in their [supplier guidelines](#) in hopes of addressing the problem. Delivering on those promises, however, has proved harder. Traceability alone hasn't been enough. Until now, retailers have had few tools to make it easier to identify which fisheries are actually at higher risk for human rights abuses.

It's a lament heard by Seafood Watch and others.

"The companies knew their supply chains weren't transparent. They were obviously embarrassed and humiliated by being called out," says Duncan Jepson, founder of Liberty Asia, a nongovernmental organization that focuses on preventing human trafficking. He adds that the incentive for businesses to use the new Seafood Watch tool is obvious. "From our perspective, the question now is, do you want to be involved or exposed to people earning their profits from these types of environments?"

Maisie Ganzler is chief strategy and brand officer at [Bon Appétit Management Company](#) and oversees the food service company's supply chain and purchasing standards. She says it's difficult for any company to get assurances that the product it's buying was produced without slave labor. Distance, language and cultural barriers, murky supply chains where seafood changes hands multiple times — all make the problem harder. She says America's country-of-origin labeling system, which labels where a tuna is canned but not where it is caught, also muddies the waters.

"And then you have the high prevalence of fraud, and I don't mean species fraud," says Ganzler. "If you're willing to enslave another human being or throw a worker overboard, are you willing to also falsify the papers that come with the fish? Probably. These are the most hidden issues in the farthest reaches of the world. It's super hard."

McDonald of Seafood Watch says the data behind the new risk tool come from reliable government and media reports of known abuses; incidences of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; the number of days a fishing vessel is at sea; and more. The tool also considers other indicators, like whether there is evidence of forced labor, human trafficking and child labor in a country's other sectors — such as forestry, agriculture and aquaculture. That increases the likelihood that these abuses could be happening in fisheries as well, she says.

Unlike the aquarium's Seafood Watch app, the new Seafood Slavery Risk tool will not advise retailers to purchase one species over another. Instead, "we say: stay, engage and create change in the industry by working with suppliers to change their practices," says McDonald. "With Seafood Watch, we have a lot of advice on what to purchase and what not, but it's very different with human rights abuses. If you boycott or avoid or stop purchasing, it drives it underground. Every human rights expert we talked with says you can't boycott, you have to keep it out in the sunshine. That's the only way to make a difference."

But many retailers are already skittish about talking openly about slavery in the seafood industry, and it's unclear how they'll address these issues with their own customers. Kroger, Safeway, Whole Foods, Hy-Vee, Walmart and Red Lobster did not respond or declined our requests for an interview for this story.

"No retailer is going to go out and talk much about the fact that there are labor rights issues in the supply chain, but it's critical that retailers stay in the game and continue to be involved," says Dick Jones, CEO of Ocean Outcomes, an international NGO focused on improving fisheries and fish farms in Northeast Asia. He likens it to the routine testing that retailers do for *E. coli* in ground beef. "They don't tell their customers there's a risk. They just do it because it's the right thing to do," he says.

Other groups are also working on tools to help businesses avoid human rights abuses in their supply chains. The [Slavery and Trafficking Risk Template](#) is an open-source project by the Social Responsibility Alliance to help companies build socially responsible supply chains. [Labor Safe Screen](#), developed by the Sustainability Incubator, is focused specifically on seafood products.

"The reality is that no company right now can be 100 percent sure there's no slavery in the supply chain," says Ganzler. "All companies need to band together to work on the issue, along with the government. It really is an issue that governments are going to have to take action on."