

Buying local seafood promotes human rights

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When consumers sit down for dinner, they don't necessarily think about whether anyone was harmed in the making of their meals.

But in some cases, the seafood on our very plates carries the legacy of human rights abuses. Seafood imported from overseas has been linked to labor abuse, human trafficking and illegal fishing practices. Eating Oregon seafood is the best way to know that no one was purposely harmed to bring delicious foods to consumers' plates.

A recent study commissioned by the Oregon Coast Visitors Association – the destination management organization serving the entire Oregon Coast from Washington to California – found shockingly that about 90 percent of the seafood consumed on the coast is imported from other distant domestic and international sources.

In 2021, nine of the 10 top countries importing seafood into Oregon are characterized as medium to high risks on the Global Slavery Index. Illegal seafood accounts for \$2.4 billion (11 percent) of sales in 2019. In

fact, Oregon's top seafood importer – China – has ranked as the top country whose policies are contributing to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. An estimated 1,800 pounds of wild-caught fish are stolen from global seas every second due to these kinds of practices.

In response to these and other factors affecting the environment and Oregon coastal economy, OCVA has launched the Ocean Cluster Initiative. The initiative aims to help the Oregon Coast's communities keep local seafood local in order to capture more economic and environmental value from the catch, as well as promote human rights.

“Respect for people of all countries and cultures as well as the ability to travel freely and safely are core values of tourism,” Oregon Coast Visitors Association Executive Director Marcus Hinz said. “Therefore, directing the purchasing power of our industry towards products and services which are in direct contradiction to our values makes no logical sense, particularly when we possess the ability to clearly differentiate high-quality Oregon seafood products from low-quality, imported seafood tainted by highly suspect human rights violations.”

According to a 2022 report by The Outlaw Ocean Project, cell phone videos were found dating back to 2014 that capture dramatically the murder of multiple deck hands onboard vessels in international waters. It has become well documented that in other countries individuals are often kidnapped and forced to work as slaves onboard vessels. One tuna long-liner, called the Indian Star, is owned by a Taiwanese company and flagged to Seychelles. It has a long history of violations, including forged licenses and fishing in forbidden areas. The captain of that boat was convicted and sentenced to 26 years in prison for ordering the killing of several deckhands.

A report by The New York Times published in September noted that many other countries' fishermen and others are throwing false GPS coordinates to hide their actual locations. Chinese fishing fleets use technology to hide their operations in protected waters off South America. The same technology is used to conceal stops in Iranian oil ports, smuggling weapons and drugs and other illegal activities. With international waters seemingly operating as the “wild west,” one way to discourage such behaviors and eliminate human rights violations on the open sea is to be diligent about supporting Oregon seafood.

While Oregon's top-quality products tend to be exported, the state imported about \$105 million in seafood in 2021. In the meantime, Oregon Coast visitors spend about \$840 million on food stores and food services annually, according to a 2019 Dean Runyan and Associates study. While a massive amount of locally sourced seafood is exported, it is replaced on visitors' plates by internationally harvested seafood that may be linked to crimes. Buying local products discourages acts of piracy, human rights violations and a number of other crimes that have become rampant out on the international high seas. It also supports jobs right here in Oregon.

“Oregon's fisheries are the lifeblood of our coastal and tourism economies – supporting jobs that families rely on and supplying communities across our state and around the world with exceptional products and experiences,” Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., said. “I'm thrilled the USDA has recognized the important work the

Oregon Coast Visitors Association does for both Oregon's fishing and aquaculture industry, as well as our great state's tourism industry. The grant OCVA has received will support its important work, helping to establish and strengthen the much-needed infrastructure for our fisheries to efficiently operate and thrive, and help our tourism industry bounce back stronger than ever."

For more information about the program, those interested can go online to <https://oregonseafare.com/human-rights>.